





Whispers of the Abyss

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Mystery Dungeons are not only spatial anomalies, but also temporal anomalies. An hour in a dungeon could be a week on the outside. Ones who enter dungeons must accept this risk. They must accept that they won't lose their lives: they will lose everything else.

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Chapter 1

The moment he saw the job posting, he knew he had to take it. Him, and only him. No one else on his team could know. No one, not even Rena. Especially not Rena.

"Our sweet Mareep child has gone missing. Classmates of his claim they last saw him disappear into Whispering Abyss yesterday afternoon. Please save him!"

The clients, of course, were the Mareep's parents. Two Ampharos, one of the few same-species families he had seen the past few years. It was much more common to find mixed-species families, like an Ampharos and Zangoose serving as the parental figures. It wasn't always this way, though. Blot remembered a time when the mixed-species families were the rarity.

It was just another reminder of how so much had changed over the years.

The reward proved meager and pitiful: a mere Heal Seed with a hint of something extra for venturing twenty floors of the Mystery Dungeon at bare minimum. This posting would only be given a momentary glance by guild teams before they found much easier, more fruitful ventures. The mission to the right would most likely be taken instead. No one would turn down finding a simple Petrify Orb five floors deep into Sunken Sea in exchange for a thousand Poké. No, not Poké, it was coin now. He needed to remember that. Only the elderly Ninetales would know what Poké was.

Blot gave each way a quick glance. He spotted a few sleepy-eyed younglings making their way from the mess hall to the post board, but none of his teammates. He imagined they were still asleep. Except maybe Daisy. Daisy was always around when you least expected her, sniffing about. She didn't know when to keep her nose out of other Pokémon's business.

However, she didn't seem to be in sight at the moment. With a quick jab of his beak, the Corvisquire grabbed the paper and ripped it off the board. He fluttered over to the acceptance booth meant for shorter Pokémon such as himself. A lively Furret manned this booth, a rare sight considering the sun had only risen a mere hour ago. He settled down before her before dropping the paper and rolling it over to her with a foot.

"Good morning, Blot," the Furret said warmly. "Not going to wait for Rena to wake up?"

"This is an exception," he answered flatly.

The Furret picked up the paper and slowly looked over it. It didn't take long for her pleasant smile to become a grim frown. Her ears folded back as she cast the bird a reluctant stare.

"Ummm... Blot, you do know that this mission takes place in Whispering Abyss, right?" she asked cautiously.

"I know. I can read," he said flatly.

"And you know that this is considered a ten star mission, right?" she asked again.

"I know," he said, just as flatly.

"Okay, well I don't know if your team would approve of this mission..." the Furret then said as she nervously gripped the paper. "Your team might have been here five years now, but I hardly even see any of you take on *one* star missions, especially if they involve Mystery Dungeons. I really think you should talk to Rena before you accept this on their behalf."

She held out the paper toward Blot, as if expecting him to snatch it back up. He refused, now only watching her with a dark glint in his eyes.

"Blot, please," the Furret said softly. "Talk to your team. Talk to Rena. I can't give your team this mission without their knowledge. For your own sake, I can't."

Blot ruffled his feathers and clacked his beak. No, he couldn't allow anyone to know about this posting. He alone would take it. The others would talk him out of it or worse, force him to take a job a day's travel away to keep him as far away from Whispering Abyss as possible. They'd no doubt pair him up with Gallows, the odd Lampent who always had the strangest, most morbid things to say, like how to properly pluck off the feathers of a Swablu without tearing the skin.

A dim-witted Pokémon would keep arguing with the Furret and demand she allow him the posting. They'd squawk and flap their wings, spraying feathers everywhere and attracting the attention of everyone in the guild. They'd cause a commotion and their team members would hear everything, rendering their efforts useless. Thankfully, Blot was not a dim-witted Pokémon.

"Very well," he said simply. "I will ask them and gain their permission."

"Thank you," the Furret said with a relieved sigh. "I'm sorry I'm being so pushy. I just don't want your team to take on such a grueling mission without everyone being okay with it."

"I realize," he said.

He picked up the paper and grasped it hard in his beak. Then, he opened his wings and sprang into the air. With loud flaps, he flew away from the booth and toward his team's bedroom deeper within the guild.

Blot's team had larger living quarters than most of the guild's teams, three times the normal living quarters granted to guild teams, if only because their own team had six members. The larger space certainly helped when a number of their members would be quite

huge after they reached their fully evolved forms. Ceylon alone would quadruple in size, not to mention when Blot evolved, he'd be so large that he'd need a much taller, thicker tree he couldn't possibly share with Rena.

The Corvisquire landed before the entrance of the team's bedroom, the door shut tight. Etched deep into the wood was the words "Team Skystreaker". Beneath those words, latched onto the door, was a piece of rope that just barely touched the ground. Blot set the paper down before grabbing the end of the rope with his beak. He gave it a good pull, slowly opening up the door with a drawn out creak. Blot quickly dropped the rope, grabbed his paper, and hurried inside before the door could shut.

As he had expected, Rena wasn't roosting in her tree. She always woke up at dawn and went outside to sing for a time, joining the chorus of the morning wild birds. Daisy also wasn't around, most likely because she was at breakfast. The rest of the team, however, slumbered before him. Adamant slept soundly in a pond made just for him, nearly melting into the water as Vaporeon sometimes did. Gallows lingered near a wall, his soul-flame flickering and waning. Then of course there was Ceylon, resting in the far corner of the room in his grass bed.

Ceylon was Team Skystreaker's newest recruit, a Bulbasaur who had come to join their team the moment he finished school. Years ago, Pokémon spent five years in school before being allowed to either go to more prestigious academies for the gifted or contribute to society in their own way. Now you had to stay in school at least ten years before you could do as you pleased. Blot had always found that baffling how Pokémon were confined for so long, robbed of their freedom for many more years. He remembered at age five he already knew how to catch his own prey and find his way home without help.

Blot could have chosen any of his teammates for his next task, but he decided Ceylon would do. He always found him more agreeable than the others. He didn't know if it was because of the Bulbasaur's

age or because he had a more pleasant attitude, but he liked the little sprout all the same.

Blot made his way up to Ceylon. He pulled at the Bulbasaur's ears, causing the slumbering Pokémon to stir. He pushed the bird away with a claw before turning away, grumbling to himself.

"Wake up," Blot hissed in the little one's ear.

"Nooooooo, one more hour," Ceylon whined. "Give me one more hour..."

"Ceylon, *up*."

The bird gave the Bulbasaur a good peck on the forehead. The grass-type snapped awake and clutched at his head, barely able to hold back a cry.

"Owww! Okay, I'm up, I'm up!" he said as he hurried to his feet.

"Good, come with me, and don't wake the others up," Blot instructed sternly.

The Corvisquire left the room with Ceylon following shortly behind him, albeit moaning and groaning about how early it was and how his forehead stung. The two then started down the hall and back toward the mission acceptance booth.

"I have a favor to ask you," Blot started to say, forcing himself to walk beside the Bulbasaur instead of flying.

"Did it really need to be so early?" Ceylon asked as he rubbed his eyes with his vines.

"Yes actually," Blot stated curtly. "There is a posting I need to take and the booth attendant refuses to grant me permission to take it unless I have my team's approval. You are going to tell her that our team is fine with the decision. That is all that is required of you."

"So you want me to lie?" Ceylon asked skeptically. "Why don't you want everyone else to know about it? What kind of mission is it?"

"A posting I need to take," Blot answered cryptically. "The others would not understand."

"Rena would, I'm sure!" Ceylon insisted. "She always listens to me whenever I say I'm too scared of a mission and always makes me feel better about everything."

"This is different," Blot stated, still as firm. "You will understand in time that sometimes even your own leader's judgement cannot be trusted. Sometimes you must make judgements without them. I am sure that when in school your instructors were not always correct with what they said. Sometimes you were in the right and they were not."

"Yeah, sometimes..." Ceylon admitted reluctantly.

The Bulbasaur sighed deeply. He rubbed his forehead harder with his vines and shook his head.

"I still don't think this is a good idea," Ceylon then said. "What kind of mission even is this?"

"Finding a child in Whispering Abyss," Blot answered without hesitation.

Ceylon froze in his tracks. Blot stopped as well and watched the Bulbasaur gawk. The little one's jaw nearly hit the floor as he stared at the bird, his mouth moving, but no words coming out.

"Wh-Wh-Whispering Abyss?!" Ceylon nearly shrieked. "You... You can't go there! That's... that's... Blot you can't... ! If you go to Whispering Abyss, you'll... you'll..."

"Now you understand why no one must know," Blot said solemnly.

"But why... why do you want to go?" Ceylon asked frailly. "Don't tell me you're getting five hundred thousand coin for going there. No reward is worth that dungeon..."

"I want to save the child," Blot answered. "There is no other reason. No one else will take the posting. You know it to be true."

"Because it's Whispering Abyss!" Ceylon cried. "Blot, you do know what happens you go there, right? You do know how bad the time dilation is in that dungeon, right? It's not like Blackwood Forest where only a day passes on the outside for every half-day you're in the dungeon."

"I know that better than anyone else in this entire guild," Blot said.

"Then why?" Ceylon asked, pleading now. "Why do you want to go there? It's basically a suicide mission, especially if you go alone."

"To save the child," Blot said. "No one else will save him. He will suffer a fate worse than death if something is not done. Can you honestly tell me anyone else will save him?"

"Team Dusk might..." Ceylon offered. "They've done five-star missions before."

"That is doubtful. Too many of their members have actively living family members," Blot stated. "None of them would risk entering Whispering Abyss when that is so."

"Team Windwrecker?" Ceylon offered again.

"They have the same problem. There are too many familial attachments," Blot said just as impassively.

"Then why is it okay for you to go into Whispering Abyss?" Ceylon then asked, frowning now. "What, you don't think your family will miss you?"

Blot shot Ceylon a dark glare and harshly snapped his beak. The Bulbasaur instantly backpedaled, eying the bird's menacing beak with a wary look. Blot ruffled his feathers and shook his tail before relaxing his stiff posture.

"I have no family. It is the very reason I joined our team in the first place," the Corvisquire answered. "No one would miss me if I were to emerge from a dungeon only to find years had passed."

"I'd miss you..." Ceylon said quietly as he pawed at the ground. "I bet Rena would too. And Adamant and Gallows would. Maybe even Daisy would too."

This conversation was going nowhere. At this rate, the rest of Team Skystreaker would awaken and find the two conversing in the hall and overhear the conversation. If that were to happen, then Blot most certainly wouldn't be able to take the mission. His team would do everything in their power to keep him far away from the hellish dungeon, all in the name of his safety. All because they were his friends.

He should have just taken the mission without telling anyone. As soon as he saw the posting, he should have flown straight into the dungeon. No one could have stopped him then. By the time his team had figured out where went, it would have been too late. He had been so foolish trying to take this on as a guild member.

But he decided to try swaying the Bulbasaur one last time.

"Why did you join the Blackscale Guild?" Blot asked.

"Because I wanted to help Pokémon," Ceylon answered solemnly. "I always liked helping my friends when they couldn't do something on my own. Everyone in my class used to come to me and ask me to help them find something they lost or deal with someone that was bullying them. I wanted to keep doing that."

"Did you understand the risk associated with rescuing anyone from Mystery Dungeons when you joined?" Blot then asked.

"Of course. Mom and Dad made sure to tell me all about what Mystery Dungeons do to you before I came here," he replied. "Mostly because they were trying to talk me out of it..."

"Then you understand that often you will risk your happiness in order to save someone else," Blot stated. "Am I wrong to think that when you helped your classmates you often sacrificed time you could have to yourself? I imagine you could have spent all that time you were helping others with something better such as with friends or reading more of the books you had a keen interest in."

Ceylon didn't say anything to that.

"It is not much different now," Blot went on. "To enter the dungeons is to sacrifice your time. You knew this and you still joined our team. It is the same with me. I joined this guild knowing one day I would emerge from a dungeon to find myself in a new era. Rena might try to avoid that fate by refusing to allow missions where that would happen, but it was inevitable. I knew the day would come someone would be lost in Whispering Abyss again. I told myself when the day came I would be the one to save them."

"Oh... so that's what this is about," Ceylon realized.

Now the Bulbasaur smiled sadly, like how one smiles when their mate tells them they must be off on a five-day long journey but that they love them and will always be thinking of them.

"That Pokémon that got lost in Whispering Abyss before... you really cared about them, didn't you?" Ceylon asked.

"Yes," Blot said quietly.

Ceylon breathed deeply and forcefully brightened his smile. However, his attempt couldn't hide the obvious sorrow and pain

dwelling within his heart.

"Okay," he said. "I'll help you. I'll get you that mission."

"Thank you," the bird said with a nod.

"No problem," Ceylon replied warmly. "Now let's get that mission before the others wake up."

Rena flew back into her team's room through an open window. She had spent the past hour roosting atop the guild, humming beautiful melodies with the wild songbirds outside. How much she loved to wake up every morning and join the lovely chorus of birds, as if their songs unified them even from great distances as the sunlight flooded over the horizon. The harsh squawks of the Sparrow, the plucky chirps of the Pidgey, and the soft cooing of the Pidove all joined together to make a lovely morning song that made her heart soar higher than the skies. She had thought that after becoming an Altaria she would lose the compulsion to rise every dawn and join the morning choir, but if anything, the impulse grew stronger. Becoming a dragon-type didn't change the fact that she was still a bird, and a songbird at that.

The Altaria gently landed inside the bedroom to find her teammates still fast asleep. Blot, Ceylon, and Daisy didn't seem to be around, but she wasn't terribly surprised. Sometimes Blot rose early in the morning himself, as many birds felt compelled to do so. Daisy was usually gone at this time, off to have an early breakfast before the line grew too long. Ceylon's disappearance was more intriguing, but she didn't think much of it. Perhaps he needed a sun-session.

"Rise and shine, Skystreakers!" Rena hummed in her melodious voice.

Adamant yawned as he pulled himself out of the pond and stretched forward upon his limbs. He shook himself, spraying a few water droplets before sitting at attention. Gallows's eyes manifested onto

his glass-like face as his soul-flame flared up, casting a baleful light upon the room.

"Oh is it morning already? I could have sworn I just fell asleep," Gallows said as he bobbed up and down in the air. "I'll never get used to you day-dwellers and your sleeping at night. It's so *wroooooong*."

"Plenty of ghosts have adjusted themselves to be diurnal," Adamant said pointedly. "Why, Stitches in Team Swiftpaws is seldom seen once the sun sets."

"Stitches is a ragdoll, not a ghost," Gallows scoffed. "Tell me about a Gengar or Dusclops who isn't nocturnal and then we'll talk. Ghosts are supposed to be awake when the moon is out. We're supposed to find unsuspecting Pokemon that really shouldn't be out and about, but are anyway. Then we're supposed to trail them and feed on them until they grow so weary that they're nearly a husk of-"

"Perhaps we could get you some Sleep Seeds to help you adjust into being a morning Pokémon," Adamant cut in. "I've heard they work wonders for insomniacs."

"Good luck with that, considering I don't have a mouth," Gallows said, giggling as he raised his appendages to his face. "Souls of the innocent are all I can eat."

"Then perhaps you can feed on someone that's ingested a Sleep Seed," Adamant suggested as he rolled his eyes. "I do hear that when you ghosts feast on the souls of Pokémon, you also ingest any toxins in their system. I doubt you'd need to feast long before you keel over, considering your pitiful tolerance level for lum rum in Pokémon."

"Oh wouldn't that be awfully convenient for you if that was how it worked," Gallows stated smugly.

"Well anyway you two, before you get into a silly little fight," Rena then chirped, keeping her pleasant tone, "I do think we should find a mission for today. We mustn't let everyone pick out all the best jobs before us!"

The two Pokémon shrugged. They had always been this way, having petty little squabbles over nothing. They had yet to actually escalate things into a fight, but Rena still found their antics juvenile. However, she also had to admit that it made for an amusing sight. Her team wouldn't be half as entertaining without their paltry talk.

"We're not taking another escort mission, though," Adamant said as he rose to his feet. "The last one proved far too tiring with how the escort kept wandering off and being ambushed."

"Of course, I tired of that myself pretty quickly," Rena said agreeably. "I was thinking perhaps a kill quest where instead we-"

" *REEEEENNNNNNNAAAAA !*"

The door swung open without warning, smacking into the wall and nearly denting it. Standing in the frame was Daisy, panting furiously. The Granbull galloped to Rena and nearly crashed into her.

"Oh Rena, you won't believe it!" she shrieked. "I was getting breakfast like I always do real early, because you know, they always have that awesome razzpastry that everyone always wants, so it's always sold out if you're not first in line. And I just got the last of that scrumptious razzpastry before some greedy little Piplup could get it and was going to eat it and savor it like it was straight from the hooves of Arceus. I don't know what those cooks put in them, they're just so good. I need to learn that recipe some time so I can make some myself and not have to wake up before dawn every godforsaken morning to even have a chance of having those divine-"

"Get to the point, Daisy!" Gallows hissed.

"Okay okay, so I was going to eat my razzpastry when I saw Blot and Ceylon pass by in the hall," Daisy said. "So I think, 'Well that's weird. I know Blot is an early bird, but Ceylon? That boy loves his sleep!'. So I followed them and turns out, they were getting a mission!"

"Oh, sounds like they were taking the lead and saving us a little trip down the hall," Rena chirped pleasantly. "Of course, I might have liked it if they had waited for me and let us all decide on something together..."

"That's the thing!" Daisy shrieked, losing all sense of composure as her ears flapped wildly. "They didn't get a mission for all of us! They got one just for Blot! He's going to Whispering Abyss all by himself!"

Rena's heart stopped. The world started to spin as Daisy's words slowly sank in, repeating endlessly in her mind, each echo further driving in its implication.

"No he... there must be a misunderstanding," Rena said with a firm shake of her head. "Blot would never..."

"Well he did!" Daisy insisted. "You know I wouldn't lie about this! He had Ceylon lie to the Furret at the booth and say you gave him permission for the mission!"

"Has Blot left then?" Adamant asked. "Is he still in the guild?"

"I think he just left," Daisy said after thinking a moment. "I just know that as soon as I overheard him, I had to come to you guys."

"And what, you didn't think of stopping Blot yourself?" Gallows asked incredulously. "You're a strong enough Granbull, you could have incapacitated him. At the very least, you could have talked him out of it."

"Well sorry, I was panicking! It's not every day that your teammate suddenly decides to go on a death mission to the worst Mystery

Dungeon in the whole world without telling anyone!" Daisy barked as she sized up the Lampent.

"It's a lot worse than a death mission, I'll tell you that," Gallows seethed, his soul-flame flaring up in retaliation.

"Both of you, stop it!" Rena squawked. "This isn't the time for that."

The two shot one another a dark glare, and then slowly backed away. A low hissing sound could still be heard deep within Gallows and Daisy still growled under her breath, but at least the two weren't at one another's throats.

"All of you, see if you can find Blot anywhere around the guild or at the market," Rena ordered. "He couldn't have gone far. I'll intercept him at the dungeon itself if he's already left town."

"And what do we do if we find Blot?" Adamant asked.

"Anything to keep him from going to that dungeon," Rena said gravely. "Talk him out of it, drag him back to the guild, knock him out... do whatever it takes. We can't let him go to Whispering Abyss."

Blot dreaded that perhaps the Furret still wouldn't allow him the mission even with Ceylon at his side. He worried she'd make the excuse that he needed Rena's permission as well. However, Ceylon's word proved enough for the attendant and without further resistance, gave the Corvisquire permission to take on the Whispering Abyss mission.

Blot and Ceylon then spent some time at the market gathering up supplies for the upcoming mission. The Bulbasaur proved quite useful with his adept vines, able to pick out goods and put them in their bag without issue. For that, Blot was thankful. He had always hated just how much the world revolved around the need for hands. For everything that had changed in the world, no one had made it

any easier for the birds. He scarcely spotted any ropes attached to doors that would make access for the flying-types possible. Every bird that wanted to enter a store had to grovel for help.

When the two had purchased everything they felt was necessary, Ceylon helped secure the bag to Blot's body. He had to adjust it just right so that it went over his neck and rested against his chest instead of against his side like for any other Pokémon, all so it wouldn't interfere with his wings. Another way the world was inconvenienced for birds.

"I guess this is it," Ceylon said wistfully.

"Yes. Thank you for helping me. I really do appreciate it," Blot said with a bow of his head.

"What are teammates for?" Ceylon said with a smile.

Blot unfurled his wings and got ready for takeoff. However, just before he could press off the ground, Ceylon stopped him.

"I'll see you again soon," Ceylon said softly.

The bird knew he needed to say something. He knew he should return the comfort and tell Ceylon that yes, they would see each other again soon. Blot wouldn't be gone long and Ceylon would still be a Bulbasaur when the two reunited.

But that would have been a lie, and Blot knew he could never do that to Ceylon.

"Take care of yourself," Blot instead said. "You'll make a fine Venusaur."

And then he flew away, refusing to look back at the Bulbasaur growing further and further away.

If he had looked back, he might have seen Daisy running toward Ceylon, begging him to know where the bird had gone.

Blot arrived at the entrance of Whispering Abyss an hour later. He fluttered down before the great and awful Mystery Dungeon, taking in the wretched place. It was a gaping hole spanning a mile wide, its depths unfathomable and cloaked in a shroud of white when viewed from the air. Encircling the massive hole were thick, thorny plants that refused entry to even the ghosts. The only way in was through a small gap in the wall. White haze wafted out of the abyss's entrance, beckoning the bird to come in, to make himself at home.

Blot knew that Pokémon didn't accidentally wander into Whispering Abyss. No one stumbled into Whispering Abyss on accident. There were only two ways one would find themselves in this particular dungeon.

You were either tossed in or you willingly entered.

Blot took a deep breath as unintelligible whispers filled his ears. He checked over his supplies once again, rummaging through the bag carefully, before looking back at the dungeon.

He stepped into the gaping hole, the mouth of the great beast that was Whispering Abyss, and let it consume him.

Chapter 2

A short while after Blot entered Whispering Abyss, Rena arrived before the dungeon. She settled in a tree branch near the horrid place, refusing to go any nearer. The sight of the dungeon already made her feel like a tiny Swablu all over again.

She didn't understand why Blot wanted to come here. In all the time she had known him, he was never one to behave so brashly. He was a good bird, one that followed orders and had little to say, making him a rather reliable Pokémon. She admitted that she didn't know much about him before his guild life, but that was because he kept to himself. And of course, Rena hadn't objected to this. As long as he was a good teammate, she didn't need to pry. He could be the quiet, obedient Corvisquire that everyone depended on.

Now she wondered if that had been a mistake and if maybe something in his past would give an explanation for his current behavior. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do at this point. She could only wait and see if Blot would show himself.

She whispered a quiet prayer to Arceus, begging for Blot to be found by her teammates. It was all she could do to quell her quivering heart. She didn't know how this had happened. She thought herself to be a good leader who empathized with each of her teammates, no matter how strange or irrational they were being. She thought she had always made it clear that anyone could talk to her about anything and she would never judge them. If Blot had only told her he wanted to venture into Whispering Abyss, she would have listened. She would have spent as many hours as necessary to understand why he felt so compelled to take on such a dangerous dungeon. She didn't know if there could ever be a reason to justify venturing into the ghastly dungeon, but perhaps Blot would have been able to give her one.

Rena sat upon her perch in silence, watching the abyss's entrance as the sun made its journey across the sky. For what felt like an eternity, Blot didn't show. She proved to be the only living being in the vicinity. She wanted to find that assuring and proof that her teammates had found Blot themselves, but couldn't convince herself. It didn't leave out the possibility that Blot was already in the dungeon. If that were the case, then he was doomed.

Eventually, Rena heard footsteps nearby. The Altaria straightened herself up and peered toward the sound to find a familiar Pokémon traversing the land. She nearly let out a squeak at the sight.

"Ceylon!" she cried.

The Bulbasaur stopped as Rena swooped toward him with the swiftness of a Talonflame. She nearly plummeted into the ground face-first when she landed before him. She swiftly wrapped up the Bulbasaur in her soft feathers, enveloping him in a secure, warm embrace. At first he struggled, but quickly settled down when he realized who the Altaria was.

"Oh Ceylon," she whimpered, pulling him closer into her. "What are you doing here?"

"Daisy told me about what was happening and I thought I'd catch Blot on the way here," he answered. "It didn't work out very well."

He laughed, but it was a forced, painful one.

"What have you done?" Rena asked mournfully.

"What do you mean?" he asked, feebly feigning innocence.

"Ceylon, you helped Blot take a mission to Whispering Abyss," Rena told him softly. "Why did you do that?"

The Bulbasaur went silent. Rena held out her wings enough so that she could look into his eyes. She could see tears forming in the

corners. She resisted the urge to wipe them away with a brush of her feathers.

"Ceylon, please, tell me," she urged. "Please, I promise I won't be upset. Please, I need to understand why this happened."

"He needed to go, Rena," the Bulbasaur answered. "He needed this mission."

He pulled away from Rena and broke their embrace. Rena felt a prick in her heart, but allowed the Bulbasaur his space. He wiped away his forming tears with a vine before taking a deep breath.

"I know I should have stopped him," Ceylon said. "You can be mad about that, I deserve it."

"Oh Ceylon, no... I'm not mad," Rena said gingerly. "Honestly, I'm sad, just as you are. The only reason I'm not crying now is because I'm the leader, and leaders always have to be strong for their teammates."

"That makes you a good leader then," Ceylon said with a small smile.

"I suppose it does," Rena said half-heartedly.

Ceylon kept his gaze with Rena for another moment and then moved forward. Rena held out her wings for another hug, but was surprised to see him walk around her. He walked past her...

... and headed straight for Whispering Abyss.

"Ceylon... Ceylon wait..." she gasped.

"Blot is alone down there," Ceylon said, refusing to look back as he drew closer to the dungeon. "When he comes out, he'll be all alone in the outside world too. No one will be there to welcome him back. He might be okay with that... but I'm not."

" *Stop!*" Rena shrieked.

A seed shot from the inside of Ceylon's bulb and latched onto Rena. The moment it touched her feathers, vines sprouted from within and ensnared her in an instant. She screeched as she thrashed and clawed at the plants, desperately trying to break free.

"Ceylon, please! Don't do this!" she begged. "If you go in there, I'll never see you again!"

The Bulbasaur stopped right at the very entrance of the abyss. He turned back to face the entangled Altaria and cast her that same sad smile he had given Blot earlier that day.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Then he stepped into the dungeon, sealing his fate.

Whispering Abyss B1F

Blot found himself in a strange place. Black cliffs rose high above him, forming dark and twisted valleys. They stretched so far into the orange sky that he wouldn't have been surprised if they reached the moon. The dungeon knew how easy it would be if he could fly over the cliffs and view the labyrinth from above. It refused to make this easy on him; he had to traverse this dungeon as any other Pokémon would.

The Corvisquire ruffled his wings and pressed forward into the corridor before him. He knew now was not the time to panic; the beginning of all Mystery Dungeons were straight-forward and painless. The weakest enemies lived here and would succumb to a simple slam into the wall. One gust of wind from a wing flap and they were done.

It was when you got ten floors deep when the real trouble began. He wanted to think that the Mareep wasn't any further than that, but he

knew better. Most clients who became trapped within dungeons remained towards the very bottom, surrounded by the worst and most dangerous apparitions of the dungeon. Most liked to say it was because the dungeon itself dragged its victims further into its core, but Blot knew it was because most clients had fainted there to begin with. Most Pokémon who fell victim to dungeons were strong, competent Pokémon who were simply overwhelmed by a stroke of bad luck.

Blot reached the end of the hallway to find himself at a fork. Neither side looked more appealing than the other. He sighed. In times like these, it was best to take right. That was always what he did and it worked out most of the time.

He barely stepped into the new path when he heard trotting behind him. He glanced back, expecting to find his first enemy of the dungeon. Perhaps it would be a Nidoran.

It was a Bulbasaur, and a very familiar one at that.

"Blot!" Ceylon called out.

The bird froze in his tracks as the Bulbasaur caught up with him. He was panting and gasping, but still managed to smile.

"Oh good, the dungeon didn't separate us," he said with a sigh of relief. "It would have been a disaster if the dungeon did that!"

"What are you doing here?" Blot asked, holding back his surprise.

"I came here to help you!" Ceylon said cheerfully. "I know you wanted to do this on your own, but I didn't want you to be alone when you came back. And I thought that as long as I got here quick enough, I'd probably catch up with you before you got too far. Looks like I was right."

Of course, the time dilation. Blot forgot the actual ratio of time between Whispering Abyss and the outside world, but it was

disturbingly large. Several hours could pass in the outside world and Blot could have barely taken a step within the dungeon.

"You should not have come here," the Corvisquire said sternly. "I chose to do this mission on my own for a reason."

"It's a dumb reason if you ask me," Ceylon said with a frown. "What, you expect me to be okay with going my whole life without you?"

"You have hardly known me for three months," Blot stated. "I am not worth abandoning your life for. Go back to the guild, Ceylon. Not much time should have passed if you leave now."

"I'm not leaving until you leave," Ceylon said, planting his feet firmly into the ground. "Teammates stick together."

"Not in circumstances like this," Blot said bitterly. "Go home."

Ceylon refused to move. Blot grumbled as he noisily clacked his beak. He didn't need this on his conscience. He should have just taken the mission without telling anyone, not even the attendant. None of this would have happened if he had taken matters into his own talons. Now Ceylon was stuck inside Whispering Abyss with him.

"Do I need to knock you out to send you back?" Blot asked tersely.

"You wouldn't," Ceylon shot back.

"If it is the only way to send you back," Blot replied. "I do not have the time to argue any longer with you."

"You hurt me and I'll put you to sleep," Ceylon warned. "We both know you wouldn't be able to escape it fast enough."

Blot took a step closer to the Bulbasaur. Ceylon immediately took a step back, his bulb shuddering. He wasn't bluffing; he really would douse Blot in the sleep-inducing powder. The bird knew he couldn't

blow the dust away before it invaded his lungs and forced him into slumber.

"Oh look who we have here! Welcome welcome, Blotty! It's been so long!"

The bird tensed. The eerily playful, almost child-like voice seemed to echo all around him. He straightened up and puffed out his feathers.

"No need to be so scared, Blotty Blotty," the voice said again, giggling now. "I'm not going to hurt wittle old you."

Then he saw it. There, emerging from the cliff wall near Ceylon, was a Duskull. Her glowing red eye rocked back and forth behind her ivory mask as she held out the ghoulish tatters that were her hands.

He would have suspected her to be a denizen of the dungeon, but her obvious intelligence proved otherwise. She must have followed him into the dungeon from the outside. He didn't know why or who she even was, but it was the only explanation for this strange turn of events.

"Finally evolved, did you?" she asked. "Oh don't you look rather handsome now. Any nice girly birdies giving you glances down the street? I don't see how any of them could possibly turn a fine fellow like you down."

"Go away," he ordered. "I have no patience for ghosts."

"Awww, well that's just rude!" she whined. "All I wanted to do was say hello!"

"I have no time for you," Blot said again. "Begone, specter."

"Ummm Blot, who are you talking to?" Ceylon asked with a tilt of his head.

Blot's heart stopped. He looked at the Duskull again, who now hovered right next to the Bulbasaur. She prodded the tip of his bulb

with a sleeve over and over again, as if hoping it would open from her repeated harassment. Ceylon didn't seem to notice her.

"You don't see her," Blot said blankly.

"No... hey, are you okay?" Ceylon asked. "Are you messing with me so you can catch me off guard or something?"

Suddenly Blot felt very cold. He could do nothing but stand there, too frozen to do anything. His body shuddered as the Duskull turned back to him, giggling again. This time, it didn't sound so playful.

"You're here for Blitzzy, aren't you?" she asked. "That sweet wittle Mareep boy that wandered on in?"

Blot nodded slowly. The Duskull covered where her mouth would have been with her sleeves as the sky grew darker, making her eye the sole source of light.

"Oh Blotty, you know he's not going to leave," she said ominously. "Everyone who comes to Whispering Abyss comes here for a reason. You should know that better than anyone else."

She put her tatters behind her back as she drifted toward him. He flapped his wings to fly away, but couldn't lift off. He was stuck on the ground, invisible weights keeping him down. Before long, he could only see the hollows of her mask, the red ball rolling back and forth between the sockets.

"Oh Blotty Blotty," she said, laughing a little. "You shouldn't have come back."

Then the light went out, and only darkness stared back. Endless, bottomless, deep black that pulled you into itself and consumed you. The abyss of the dungeon stared into him through those Duskull's empty eye sockets.

And then she was gone.

Rena returned to her team's guild room at sunset. She could still feel the prick of the vines that had encapsulated her while Ceylon fled into Whispering Abyss. She had to resist the urge fluffing up her feathers constantly. However, the itch paled in comparison to the growing heartbreak in her chest. Today she had lost two team members. Part of her wanted to believe they'd be back in the morning as was the case with most dungeon missions, but she knew better. She knew how bad the time curse of Whispering Abyss actually was.

She pulled the door open to find Gallows, Daisy, and Adamant already inside, forlorn and empty-handed. They barely gave Rena acknowledgement of her presence, save for a quiet hello. Her heart sank deeper as she shut the door and stood before her team.

"You guys didn't find Blot, did you?" she asked grimly.

"I saw him flying off right after I found Ceylon," Daisy answered somberly. "And since you clearly don't have him..."

"He's not the only one that went into the dungeon," Rena then said, refusing to let the sadness break her voice. "Ceylon did as well."

" *WHHHHAAAT?!*" Daisy screeched.

Gallows and Adamant flinched and swiftly retreated away as the Granbull leapt to her feet. She frantically paced around the room, grabbing at her ears and pulling violently.

"No he couldn't! He couldn't of had!" Daisy yammered on. "That greenleaf never would have! He's not an idiot! He just told me he was going to look for Blot!"

"He went to Whispering Abyss, I saw him myself," Rena said with a slow shake of her head. "I tried to stop him as well, but he got in before I could do anything."

" RAAAAAAAH!"

The Granbull kicked and clawed the closest wall, attacking it as though she were a crazed wild. Gallows swiftly swooped over and wrapped his tendrils around her waist. He dragged her away, but she kept screaming and thrashing.

"Calm down, Daisy," Adamant ordered from a safe distance.
"Throwing a tantrum will get us nowhere."

"And what? You got any better ideas?!" Daisy shot back.

"Maybe if you calm down instead of acting like a child, we can think of something," Adamant said, not even bothering to hide his disdain.

"Hah! As if there's anything we can actually do," Daisy laughed bitterly. "What, are we going to wish so hard that Jirachi comes out of his sleep and give us what we want? Pray to Arceus and hope that he whisks our friends out and drop them off right here?"

Adamant didn't say anything. Daisy stopped laughing as she shooed away Gallows and glared at Rena. Rena couldn't help but shrink a little.

"So what are we going to do, Rena?" Daisy asked. "You know what's going to happen to the two of them."

"I don't know right now," Rena said. "However, the good news is that we have time to think of a plan. The time dilation, for once, works to our advantage. We probably have a few months before they make any real progress in the dungeon."

"You know... there is an obvious solution to all of this," Gallows then said, drawing everyone's attention. "We could all go to Whispering Abyss and join Blot and Ceylon."

"Gallows, no," Rena swiftly shot down. "We can't."

"Oh, but why?" Gallows asked. "Let me tell you, I joined this team knowing one day I'd find myself years into the future. This current world has nothing keeping me here if the situation calls for it. Didn't all of you make that same promise to yourselves?"

"I did, but I also told myself I wouldn't be entering a dungeon that will steal literal decades away from me," Adamant stated. "There's being valiant, and then there's-"

"No one who joins guilds and enters Mystery Dungeons is valiant," Gallows said with unsettling smugness. "The ones who enter the dungeons don't lose their lives: they lose literally everything else. The only ones who would dare sacrifice these things... are those who feel they have nothing in this world. That's why all of you are here, aren't you?"

No one said anything. Daisy was the only one to make an attempt, opening her mouth to make an argument, but unable to say the words. Gallows chuckled, his laughter taking on a chilling tone as his soul-flame flared.

"Go ahead, take your time thinking of a plan," Gallows said simply. "Just know that the obvious option is right there, five hundred thousand steps west of here."

Then the ghost seeped into the wall behind him, leaving the team with the deafening silence.

Whispering Abyss B1F

"So are we not going to talk about that imaginary Pokémon you were talking to?" Ceylon asked as the two walked down the first corridor of the dungeon.

"We are not," Blot stated.

"Okay, well can I ask why you suddenly changed your mind about letting me stay?" Ceylon asked instead.

Blot didn't want to answer that either. In truth, it was because he was afraid. Whatever that Duskull had been, she had left him a shuddering mess, even after she had disappeared. Even if Ceylon couldn't see the unsettling thing, Blot still wanted company in case she came back. He didn't want to face the ghoul alone. Perhaps it was a bird mentality, finding comfort in numbers.

"Let us talk instead about what we are to do from here on out," Blot said. "You will be in charge of holding the bag considering it is better suited for you."

"Fine by me," Ceylon shrugged as he took the bag from off the bird with his vines and hung it over his bulb. "Feel better?"

"I do," Blot said with a sigh. "Now let us talk about the mission itself. The posting did not say how deep we have to venture into the dungeon. I think we will go at least fifty floors deep. I hope you are prepared."

"That's pretty deep, not going to lie," Ceylon grimaced. "You sure our client really went that far deep? I thought he just came in here yesterday... he shouldn't have gotten that far if he did. He should be on this floor honestly."

"You never know," Blot stated. "Besides, we do not know how long the parents waited to post that information. He could have disappeared months ago and only now did they send out the request."

"Well it would explain why he wasn't right at the entrance where you were if that's true..." Ceylon conceded. "I still hope he's not that far down. Everything down there will probably knock me out instantly. Bet there's stupid Charizard or Houndoom that can't wait to burn me up."

The Bulbasaur shook his head and sighed dejectedly.

"Do you think we have enough supplies to get that far into the dungeon?" Ceylon then asked.

"We should if we are frugal," Blot assured. "Only eat when we feel we might faint from hunger and use the orans sparingly. The dungeon should also provide us with some food if we are fortunate."

"I hope so," Ceylon grumbled. "I should have grabbed a bag too before I came here with you. That would have made things easier."

Blot wanted to say Ceylon never should have come into the dungeon in the first place, but held his tongue. Besides, he did want Ceylon with him. That Duskull could come back at any moment.

The two continued through the dungeon, slowly finding their way through the labyrinth. As Blot had suspected, they didn't encounter any actual threats. No apparitions showed themselves on this first floor, giving the two all the time they wanted to converse in peace if they so wanted.

Blot honestly wished that something would attack them, if only so he wouldn't have to think about the Duskull again. The eerie silence of the dungeon and the darkness of the cliffs put him on edge. Every time he blinked, he would see the black of her eyes gazing into him, devouring him from the inside out.

His wish was granted.

Heavy footsteps came from behind them. Ceylon abruptly turned around and whipped out his vines. Blot took to the skies, readying himself for an aerial dive. The two couldn't see whatever was coming for them, but they would be ready. As soon as the creature made itself known, they would knock it out in an instant.

"Remember that everything on the first floor is weak," Blot reminded. "There is no need to use much of your energy just yet."

"I know, I'll just smack them into a wall and that should be it," Ceylon assured with a wave of a vine.

The two waited as the footsteps grew closer. Now a lumbering figure began to emerge from the darkness of the corridor. Something that easily towered over Ceylon in height and bulk. The Bulbasaur grit his teeth as he readied himself.

" *Yaaaaah!*" Ceylon roared.

He charged forward and with one motion, slammed a vine into the Pokémon's side just as they were to reveal themselves. The attack connected with ease and sent the enemy hurling into a wall. Rocks tumbled from the clifftops and rolled down into the chasm. Blot wasted no time in swooping down onto the hapless foe and jamming his hooked beak into their skull.

" *YOOOOOOOOWWWWWW! WATCH IT!*"

Blot paused. He looked down at the apparition, finally getting a good look at his enemy. As he did, Ceylon drew closer himself, his own face twisted in befuddlement. As it turned out, they were not attacking a malicious phantom conjured up by the dungeon.

They had been attacking Daisy.

A note rested on Daisy's bed when Rena, Gallows, and Adamant returned from their day's mission. Rena didn't even need to read the note know what it meant.

In truth, she should have seen this coming. The following mornings after Blot and Ceylon's departure, Daisy had stopped waking up early. Every dawn when Rena went to join the songbirds, she'd find the Granbull still in her bed, dead to the world. In fact, waking her proved to be a task in itself. No amount of shouting, prodding, water dousing, or begging could rouse her. Not even Gallows threatening to burn her ear tips drew a reaction from her. All the team could do

was let her wake on her own and often found themselves forced to go on missions without her.

When she had been awake, she stayed unusually quiet. Whenever anyone asked her how she felt, she had given a dismissive wave of a paw or simply said she felt fine. Her face had taken on a flat affect, as though all of the vigor had been sapped out of her.

She rarely ate then, not even taking interest in the razzpastries she loved so much. Every time Rena or Adamant offered her one that they swiped from breakfast, she would vapidly turn it down and stare into her untouched bowl of berry salad. She ate so little, in fact, that Rena thought she saw the slightest hint of Daisy's ribcage poking against her chest.

Rena had chalked it up to her attempting to cope with the situation. In a way, maybe she truly had been grieving and nothing more. Maybe she hadn't intended to make such a brash decision even for her. Maybe after wallowing in her misery day after day, night after night, something in her finally snapped, and she could take the pain no more.

Maybe that was why two weeks after losing Blot to Whispering Abyss, Daisy went to join him.

The Altaria bowed her head forlornly as Gallows picked up the note and silently read it alongside Adamant.

"She's probably with Ceylon and Blot, considering she still left fairly quickly by the dungeon's standards," Adamant said with a deep sigh. "At the very least, we can take comfort knowing she isn't alone down there."

"I don't know if that really does make this better," Rena said miserably. "She's still gone. Half of our team is now inside Whispering Abyss."

"I still can't help but wonder what pushed her over the edge," Adamant wondered. "She might be loud and obnoxious, but she's not weak-hearted."

"As I said, everyone who joins guilds does so because they no longer have something to cling to in life," Gallows stated impassively. "Daisy is no exception. She pretended she still had something of value in life, but that façade faded little by little after Blot and Ceylon went on their way. Eventually the façade faded all together and she realized there was no true reason for her to stay here anymore."

"Don't go saying things like that," Adamant hissed, his fins flaring. "Daisy didn't leave because she doesn't care about the world anymore."

"Are you sure about that?" Gallows asked with malicious smugness. "Do you really know Daisy as well as you think you do?"

"Do you?" Adamant shot back.

The Lampent giggled impishly, his flame flickering eagerly as though it were greedily lapping up all of the volatile emotions in the room.

"This is your fault," Adamant growled. "Your twisted attitude toward this... this tragedy probably pushed her over the edge. You *encouraged* her to go down into Whispering Abyss."

"Oh, I didn't push her one bit," Gallows said deviously. "I only stated the truth that no one in this entire guild wants to hear. It's very much true that everyone here no longer feels they have anything they can gain from life. I can feel it oozing from everyone's bodies in warped, dark auras."

"You better stop now," Adamant warned. "I'm getting really sick of listening to you."

"Oh, well that's not surprising coming from you," Gallows said with a laugh. "You have one of the blackest auras in this entire guild. Oh

yes, you are *ripe* with bitterness and regret. Have something you want to tell us, Adamant? Or are you going to keep up that flimsy façade of yours and deny that you haven't felt a shred of happiness since you were a tiny little Eevee?"

A blast of water fired from the Vaporeon's mouth. Gallows barely dived out of the way fast enough to avoid the shot. Adamant's head fins fanned wildly as he released another water blast. Gallows laughed as he effortlessly swerved away before launching a ghastly fireball at the Vaporeon. Adamant pounced, but still took the hit in his flank. He hissed as he scurried into his pond and melted into the water.

"Not so easy to dodge on land, is it?" Gallows said mockingly. "Oh you poor Vaporeon, completely out of your element when you're out of the water. I'm sure you wish you were an Umbreon instead!"

A geyser erupted from the pond and slammed into the unsuspecting Lampent. Gallows hissed an unnatural sound, like fire being smothered out as Adamant's head emerged from the pool, a shadowy ball ready to launch out of his maw.

"Stop, *stop* !" Rena shrieked as she flew in between the two brawling Pokémon. "Both you, please stop!"

Adamant closed his mouth into a tight frown as the hissing sound ceased. The Vaporeon and Lampent glared at one another, both of their eyes burning with unfathomable hatred. Both of them ached for more violence, but didn't dare make another move with Rena in the middle of it.

The two of them kept their gazes locked with one another for a moment longer, then abruptly broke it off. Adamant dove back under the water while Gallows disappeared through the wall. Yet their bitterness still lingered in the room, like a backdraft waiting for air so it could ignite again into a furious explosion.

Rena, too dismayed with her fracturing team to do anything more, left out the window and went for a long, nightly flight.

Chapter 3

Whispering Abyss B1F

Blot couldn't believe the stupidity of his own teammates. He had thought all of them to be competent, rational Pokémon all perfectly respectable in their own ways. However, his venture into the dungeon slowly proved to him just how idiotic all of them were. He could give Ceylon a pass, considering he hadn't been on the team long. However, he couldn't say the same for Daisy. Daisy had been on the team almost as long as him and was twice his age. Sure, she was emotionally volatile at times, but she knew when to think with her head and not give in to the raging tempest in her heart.

Except for now.

"I should have taken this mission without telling anyone," Blot muttered distastefully. "I should have headed for the dungeon the moment I saw the posting."

"Yeah well you didn't, and now here I am," Daisy said with a haughty snort. "You're stuck with me until we get that kid you came after."

"I did not sign up for an escort mission," Blot spat.

"Hah! As if," Daisy guffawed. "You should be glad that I finally cracked and came after you. I'm a way better fighter than you two combined. I can snap a Lairon in two with these jaws."

As if to prove her point, she snapped her fangs shut. It made an audible crunching sound that spooked Ceylon, but it hardly changed Blot's disapproving stare. Blot shook his head, but kept walking regardless. Though he couldn't get over how painfully slow he moved on his feet, he knew he couldn't fly. He'd effortlessly leave behind his teammates if he dared take to the skies. Even though some part of him deeply considered knocking them both out and

sending them back, he couldn't. He hated to admit it, but their company was useful. They'd make the mission easier, especially Daisy. Blot had seen her toss aside rampaging Donphan like it was nothing.

"So how much time has passed outside anyway?" Ceylon asked her.

"Two weeks," Daisy answered.

"Oh... wow. That long," Ceylon said quietly.

The Granbull frowned sadly as she looked to the sky. She sighed deeply as her usually loud, vigorous footsteps quieted.

"I was really hoping you two would come back," she said. "I really hoped you guys would come to your senses and you'd use an Escape Orb to get out of here."

"I am using it only after I find the child," Blot stated.

"Yeah, I figured that out after a while," Daisy said with a low grumble. "So it became pretty obvious that I'd never see you again."

"Why did you come here then?" Blot then asked. "You knew what would happen if you joined us in Whispering Abyss."

"Because... well, I don't really know why," Daisy said as she scratched her head. "I don't even like you two that much, no offense."

Blot shrugged his wings dismissively while Ceylon bashfully averted his gaze, undoubtedly taking actual offense.

"Oh come on, you know what I mean." Daisy said quickly, realizing her mistake. "I like you two, just not enough to end up here. That's something you'd do for your mate or something. But for whatever reason, I decided you two are worth it. Maybe deep down, I like you two more than I like Rena. I definitely like you two more than Gallows."

"Awww," Ceylon said, laughing a little now. "Daisy said she likes us. Isn't that sweet?"

"You don't go telling anyone that when we get out of here," Daisy warned. "I'll rip open your bulb if you dare say a word."

But the Bulbasaur kept laughing, flustering the Granbull further. The jovial sight warmed Blot's heart a little. It made the dreary dungeon seem just a bit brighter, just a bit less like a nightmarish abyss. It reminded him of the typical, less dangerous dungeons the team went through and the fun times they had, like Gallows getting stuck in a wall and Ceylon being chased by a horde of Beedrill.

But the moment proved fleeting, and Blot suddenly regretted entering the dungeon. He had now dragged half of his team into his mess and had robbed them of everything they held dear in the outside world. They didn't deserve this. They were good Pokémon. He never should have allowed this to happen.

He could only hope no one else would dare follow him into the abyss.

Three months had passed and Rena still had no plan regarding the missing Team Skystreaker members.

Adamant mulled over this as he sat in a booth with seats and tables kept low to the ground for quadpedes just like him. He found himself coming here to the Zarude Café far more often than he wanted to admit. Today, he at least found himself amongst the company of fellow guild members, specifically Slate and Reed from Team Venture. The two teams were on amicable terms, probably because they shared a bedroom wall and it wasn't unheard of for either team to eavesdrop on the other.

Slate devoured a smoked Slowpoke as ravenously as a typical Lycanroc while Reed laughed and took a few sips from his berry

drink. Adamant himself sat in silence, downing his tenth lum rum for the night.

"You've had an awful lot of those," Reed stated, though not accusingly.

"I'm fine, just a little light-headed," he said dismissively. "I have a very high tolerance for these things."

"Well considering you're a water-type, I'm not surprised," Reed said with a flick of his leafy tail. "Your body probably dilutes that stuff. How many do you have to have before you black out?"

"Twenty," Adamant said simply.

"Wooooooooow," Reed said in blank awe.

"You really should eat some food with that lum rum," Slate said between swallows. "You're going to puke all over the table if you don't. And drink some actual water too or you're going to have a killer headache in the morning. I don't care that you're water-type."

Adamant grumbled as he ripped off the tail of Slate's Slowpoke and swallowed it whole.

"Not mine!" Slate growled.

He dragged it closer to his side of the tail, baring his teeth and snarling the entire time. Reed sighed and shook his head disapprovingly before flagging down a waitress for Adamant. After getting an order for uncooked Finneon for the Vaporeon, the three were alone once again.

"How's your team doing lately?" the Leafreon asked. "Aside from the... you know."

"They've been fine," Adamant said with a shrug. "Rena's still her usual pleasant self. Gallows is still an insufferable little ghoul."

"And your missions?" Reed then asked.

"Same as always," Adamant answered. "We've been avoiding dungeon missions, though. We've mostly taken kill quests or errands for Pokémon in nearby towns. They're tedious, but the rewards are decent enough."

"I can imagine," Reed said with a laugh. "Why yesterday, me, Slate, and Indigo took on a funny little quest ourselves that involved... oh, what was it, Slate?"

"Slaying twenty Spearow," the Lycanroc answered.

"Yeah, killing twenty wild Spearow because they wouldn't leave someone's house or whatever it was," Reed went on. "So we all go there, no problem at all, say 'Yeah, we'll take care of your little pest issue. We've got the best crew for that, and don't underestimate me just because I'm a grassy taking out a bunch of birdies'. And it's going fine for a while, just shooting Spearow out of the sky with rocks and leaves and bolts. Then out of nowhere, the biggest Fearow you've ever seen starts attacking us. And it was a *mean* wild, let me tell you. Nearly plucked out my eye and pecked up Indigo pretty good. Slate here had to snap the thing's neck while me and Indigo pinned it down."

"Now Indigo can't look at a single flying-type without immediately thinking of the Fearow," Slate added. "He just screams and runs the other way."

"He'll get over it," Reed assured. "Was just a stupid bird anyway."

Adamant snorted as his food arrived, along with a few more rounds of lum rum. He didn't hesitate to gulp down another one of the glasses. He finally felt that familiar warm feeling in his chest.

"Eat the Finneon, Adamant," Slate pressed sternly.

The Vaporeon frowned hard, but still tore out a good sized chunk of the fish and swallowed it down. Truthfully he couldn't even taste the fish anymore, but he didn't care. He didn't come to the café to eat anyway.

He downed another lum rum. Now his paws felt less heavy. Good, it was kicking in.

"Say, there's something I've always been meaning to ask," Reed then asked.

"Hmmm?" Adamant asked distractedly.

"From Eon to Eon, I just couldn't help but wonder why you became a Vaporeon," the Leafeon said. "What made you interested in being one as an Eevee?"

Adamant paused. In truth, this wasn't an unusual question. As one of the few Pokémon that could chose to be so many different Pokémon, Eons couldn't help but be fascinated with others of their kind. It was always a story in itself, a reason why an Eevee chose to be a Glaceon instead of a Flareon.

Yet it was the one question Adamant never liked to be asked. Normally he would have turned down the topic, but unfortunately, the lum rum had finally reached his head. And also unfortunately, it brought out many dark, spiteful thoughts he usually buried deep into his mind.

"Hah... you really think we actually choose what we Eons become?" Adamant asked, grinning sinisterly. "Everyone always talks about how Eevee have it best. How they can become anything they want. But tell me... does that Eevee actually know what they want to be? They've never had an element to their name, and then suddenly, touch a stone and *BAM*, instantly everything they've known is different. Suddenly something inside of them is on fire, they can hear everyone's thoughts at all times, they've got flesh ribbons streaming out of their body."

Adamant snatched another lum rum and chugged it down. Yeah, that was the stuff. His head was really feeling good now.

"You know, I heard about a family of Eons who gave their son all the stones known so he could be whatever Eon he wanted," Adamant went on. "They were rich, or they stole all of them, I don't know which it was. Point is, that son got all eighteen Eon stones and could use whichever one he wanted. What do you think that Eevee did, huh? Did he turn into a Vaporeon and disappear into the ocean? Did he become an Umbreon and become a hunter of the night? No, he never evolved. He kept all of those stupid stones and every day he stared at them, telling himself to pick one, but couldn't. Every single day of his life he stayed an Eevee because he didn't want to stay stuck as some stupid Eon he hated for the rest of his life.

"And then of course, there's all the stories about the Eons that do evolve. I bet you know this pretty well yourself, Reed. I bet it's even happened to you."

"Adamant..." Reed started to say.

"You know what happens to all of those Eevee that do evolve? Hahahah... they're never actually ever happy with what they get," the Vaporeon rambled on, his voice slurring now. "Like my sister. Became a Flareon because she liked fire. She should have been happy, right? No, she hated it. She hated that every time she got angry, she'd burn everything. Couldn't control it because she never had an ember when she hatched. She ended up finding a volcano to live in so she wouldn't destroy everything she loved.

"Then I had a friend. Eevee in my class. Same age as me. He always told me he wanted to be a Glaceon. No idea why. Pretty sure it was because his parents were Glaceon. So he becomes a Glaceon of course, and wouldn't you know, he hates it! Oh Arceus does he hate it. But he can't change back of course, so he's stuck as a Glaceon. So he ends up fooling himself. Wakes up every morning telling himself that yes, he loves being a Glaceon. He loves that he can spit ice out of his mouth. He loves having useless fur dangling

down by his face. He loves that randomly, he stops *feeling everything for no reason*. Before I knew it, the poor guy had completely brainwashed himself, all so he could live with being a Pokémon he hated."

"Adamant, I've never felt that way about my change..." Reed tried to say. "I've always been happy with being a Leafeon. I love it."

"Yeah, sure you do," Adamant said before downing another drink. "Sure you do. That's what every Eon says."

"I think you need to stop drinking those lum rums," Slate stated. "They're making you say things you don't mean."

Adamant laughed bitterly. How stupid. How awfully stupid of Reed to think that he was happy being a Leafeon. He probably regretted it when he faced off against that Fearow. Probably wished he had never turned into a freaking plant. Just how useful could that be? Evolving into a plant, what a joke.

He gulped down another glass.

"I mean it, Adamant," Slate said, growling now.

"You just don't want to hear the truth," Adamant scoffed. "No one does. Hahahahah... maybe Gallows was right. That ghoul was right about why all of you are at the guild. I bet deep down, both of you hate your lives. I bet you two just joined so you could run away from all of your problems and maybe let yourself get devoured by the dungeons if life's still too hard for you. That's right, isn't it?!"

"Okay, I'm taking away your lum rum now," Slate scowled.

The wolf reached over for the drinks with a paw, but Adamant swiftly slapped him away. Without warning, he chugged the remaining drinks, guzzling them down as though his life depended on it. Slate and Reed quickly hurried over to the Vaporeon and tried to restrain it.

"Get off!" he shrieked.

He blasted water directly into Slate's face, causing the Lycanroc to howl and stagger back. He effortlessly broke free from the Leafeon's stunned hold and leapt off his seat. He wobbled as he hit the ground, but still hobbled his way out of the café before anyone could stop him.

It was well into the night now. A decent snowstorm had started while he had been inside and had accumulated a few paw's worth of snow on the ground. Adamant shuddered as the winter's cold touched his scales, wishing in that moment he was a Glaceon. He lumbered into the streets, his head spinning and darkness encroaching his vision.

"You both have nothing in life..." Adamant muttered in a drunken daze. "You... you have... there's nothing... that's why you're here... that's why we're all here..."

And then the Vaporeon collapsed on the road, his mind swimming of images of Eons and the wretched curse that followed them.

Whispering Abyss B1F

"Stupid bug!" Ceylon cursed as he tossed a squirming Venipede into a wall.

It slammed into the cliffside, screeching shrilly as it landed on its back. Just before it could right itself up, Daisy stamped her foot down on it. *Hard*. A sickening crack filled the air as its exoskeleton snapped beneath her weight. Ceylon averted his eyes from the sight, resisting the urge to gag. Blot indifferently stretched out his wings and plucked out a few loose feathers.

"Remind me never to get you angry," Ceylon said grimly to the Granbull.

Daisy scrapped her feet against the ground and carelessly kicked aside the incapacitated enemy. Then she looked back at the Bulbasaur and gave him a grin.

"Will do," she said in a pleased tone.

"You see any more Venipede?" Ceylon asked as he gave each direction a quick glance. "Or was that the only one?"

"Nah, I think that's the only one," Daisy assured. "We can probably get moving again. Though if any more do show up, you know what to do."

The three got moving again, Blot taking the lead and Daisy bringing up the rear. Another Ventipede actually did appear within seconds, approaching from behind the group, but Daisy instantly punched it into a wall with another disgusting crunching sound.

"I am starting to feel grateful that you joined us," Blot said. "You are making quick work of the dungeon apparitions."

"What can I say? They're pretty weak," Daisy said with a shrug. "Most of the dungeons I've been in only get real bad after fifteen floors."

"Probably helps that you're pretty big too!" Ceylon added. "Compared to Blot and I, you're a giant."

"Yeah, probably does," Daisy agreed with a chuckle. "You two are little peanuts right now. I bet I could crush both of you two if I wanted."

"Please no," Ceylon whimpered.

Daisy laughed again, covering her maw with her paws. Ceylon laughed too, though more out of nervous relief. Blot couldn't resist a small laugh himself.

"How odd it will feel then when Ceylon and I evolve and become larger than you," Blot then said. "You will no longer be the tallest of our team."

"That won't be for a while, don't worry," the Granbull said, still grinning. "I can tell you've still got a while before you're a Corviknight. Same for you, Ceylon. I give you five years before you're a Venusaur."

"Hey! I'll have you know, I'm going to be an Ivysaur by next spring," Ceylon shouted grumpily. "I can feel it in my bulb. Then before summer hits, I'll be a full grown Venusaur!"

"Sure you will, little greenleaf," Daisy snickered. "Sure you will."

Ceylon grumbled something under his breath. Taking pity on the little Bulbasaur, Blot ruffled his feathers and cast the Granbull a haughty gaze.

"I would not doubt Ceylon's intuition," Blot said. "If a Pokémon feels they will evolve soon, it is most likely true. The body knows when it is time to change."

"Nah, that's just psychological nonsense," Daisy insisted. "You want to evolve, so you start thinking every little change or feeling you get is a sign. You only evolve when your body is ready, and ain't nobody knows when that'll happen until it's time. Unless you're one of those lucky Pokemon that get to evolve when you touch a rock like a Pikachu or Skitty or whatever."

"If that is true, you should not be saying it will take two years for Ceylon to become a Venusaur," Blot then stated. "His body might decide he should be a Venusaur in two days for all we know."

"Ehhhhhhhhh," Daisy said, still unconvinced.

The two said nothing more and continued through the dungeon. However, Blot's words had brought an optimistic smile upon Ceylon's

face. Now he walked with more vim in his step.

After a while, the two found themselves at the end of a corridor and staring into a chamber that had the stairway. Blot held up his wing, stopping them, before swooping over to the stairs. Within seconds, he landed before it. He paused a moment, waiting to see if Pokémon would emerge from other corridors and ambush him, but the room remained empty. After waiting a few more seconds, he beckoned his teammates forward. With pleased grins, they hurried over, eager to exit the first floor.

"And just where do you think you're going, Blotty?" came a familiar, chilling voice.

The Corvisquire looked behind him to find the Duskull had returned. She had her tatters crossed over her chest and despite lacking a mouth, seemed to be pouting. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he knew it all the same.

"I'm surprised you're still here," she said. "Maybe you're here to stay for real this time. Is that what's going on, Blotty? You finally ready to come home?"

"You are not real," he told her. "Begone."

"Oh, sure I'm not," she said grumpily. "Just because your little friends can't see me means that I'm not real."

"That only proves you are not real," Blot stated. "You are a figment of my imagination. You are the result of a rotten apple I had last night."

"Oh! Oh that's how you want to be!" the Duskull cried, throwing up her arms dramatically. "Fine! You know, I just wanted to talk, but now you've made me mad!"

Her eyes flashed sinisterly as the stairway suddenly disappeared. Blot swooped toward the spot where the stairs once stood and

swiftly pecked at the ground. Only dirt met his beak. This wasn't an illusion; the stairs truly had vanished.

A ghastly howling rang from above. Rocks tumbled from the clifftops and poured into the room. Blot's insides ran cold as a dark, menacing figure leapt from above and landed in the room all fours. It was a hideous green beast covered in dark hair and stood even taller than Daisy. Fearsome fangs jutted from its gaping, snarling mouth. It locked its sights on Blot, eyes blazing with blind, demonic fury.

"Have fun, Blotty," the Duskull said in a dark tone. "Maybe you won't be so mean next time we meet."

And then she disappeared just as the hulking beast sprang at him. Blot didn't even have time to flap his wings before it was upon him, its wicked claws raking across his body. He screeched as the sudden force threw him back and onto his side. He quickly righted himself up, but wasn't fast enough. The beast was upon him once again, ready for a second strike.

"No you don't!"

Daisy slammed her body into the monster, knocking it away from Blot. The two tumbled to the ground beside the downed Corvisquire, both snarling like wilds locked in a vicious fight to the death. Daisy swiftly leapt off the creature before it could strike her and joined Blot's side, all four paws on the ground. She continued to growl as electricity crackled through her fangs. Ceylon shortly joined them and hid behind the protective Granbull.

"Oh gods, Blot, you're bleeding," Ceylon gasped.

The Corvisquire looked down to find his entire front soaked in red. He quickly dug into Ceylon's bag and took a good bite out of an oran.

"Be careful guys," Daisy warned. "This is a Grimmsnarl. Nasty Pokémon to deal with. They pack a punch and if you're not careful, they can ensnare you in their hair."

"Delightful," Blot grumbled.

"How do we defeat it then?" Ceylon asked.

The Grimmsnarl launched itself at the group. Daisy took the hit and sank her fangs into its arm just as it collided with her. It screeched an unnatural, pained sound that shook the very room as the black hairs upon its flesh swiftly wrapped themselves around the Granbull's neck. She gave out a hoarse cry as they choked her mercilessly, squeezing out her very life.

"Leave her alone!" Ceylon cried.

A dozen sharp leaves shot out from beneath his bulb and sliced into the hairs strangling Daisy. They cut the Granbull free, who fell to the ground gasping for air. The Grimmsnarl locked its bloodthirsty gaze onto the Bulbasaur and dove at him. Ceylon screamed as he sprayed violet powder from his bulb at the monstrous beast, but it simply plugged its nose and held its breath. Hair wound around its leg, strengthening it, as it kicked Ceylon directly in the mouth. The Bulbasaur went flying into the wall, smashing into it and sending rocks tumbling onto him. The Bulbasaur lay there on the ground, eyes frozen open, maw twisted into a pained cry, tears streaming down his face.

The Grimmsnarl laughed evilly, actually laughed as if it understood the pain it had caused Ceylon. Blot deftly flew out of the way just as the monster slammed its fist into the spot where he once stood. The beast bent its knees to pounce after him, but Daisy swiftly leapt onto its back and wrapped her arms around its neck. The Grimmsnarl gnashed and shrieked as it thrashed and clawed for her face, but Daisy refused to relent. She only gripped it tighter, even as the hair upon the creature's mane latched onto her arms and repeatedly tried to break her hold.

"Blot!" she called. "Blot, hit it in the stomach! It's weak there!"

"Are you sure?" Blot asked tensely.

"Just do it! Trust me, it'll work!"

The Grimmsnarl finally broke her hold. However, before it could fling Daisy away, she sank her fangs into the goblin's shoulder. Fire erupted from the brims of her maw. The Grimmsnarl screeched an awful sound, something that nearly drove Blot deaf. A painful ringing sound now filled his ears, drowning out the screaming and the fire and the crackling of burning skin and hair.

Yet Blot still did as Daisy told. He waited for just the right moment when the Grimmsnarl held still to rip off the Granbull and swiftly dove for the beast. He flew like a speeding bullet, the world becoming a blur of colors as he closed in on the goblin. Within a second, he drove his hooked beak straight into its abdomen.

The Grimmsnarl howled as it clutched its stomach and fell to the ground, wincing and twitching in pain. Blot landed beside the downed Pokemon and swiftly jabbed his beak into its eyes, burying them deep into its eye sockets. He tasted blood as the thing convulsed beneath him, but he didn't stop. He only kept attacking, pecking the beast relentlessly.

The beast cried and cried, slashing at the bird, but unable to reach him. After a minute, the Grimmsnarl stopped moving. Blot ceased his bloody work and took a step back. The Grimmsnarl weakly crawled onto its knees. Blot flared his wings and hissed, but the monster made no threatening advances. Instead it held its hands over its head as it tucked in its head, as if bowing to the Corvisquire.

Blot hesitated. It was surrendering. This wasn't a typical reaction of a dungeon apparition. To surrender and beg for mercy was something only an intelligent Pokémon could possibly do.

Was this Pokémon special just like the Duskull perhaps? Was it capable of intelligent thought? It did seem to be summoned because of the ghoul...

The hair upon the Grimmsnarl's head shuddered. They sharpened like a Scyther's blades. Beneath its bowed head, the Grimmsnarl smiled deviously.

Daisy abruptly charged in and head-butted the goblin's temple. There was a loud crack, and the Grimmsnarl fell over onto his side, unmoving. The Granbull huffed as she rubbed her head, groaning.

"Don't ever fall for that stupid trick," she told Blot. "Grimmsnarl will pretend to surrender, and while you're confused, they'll impale you with their hair. Nasty trick."

Blot nodded softly. He rubbed his beak into the ground, smearing off the blood. The stairway reappeared where it once lay, allowing the group passage once again. Daisy didn't even seem to notice the stairway's sudden appearance.

"You were right about hitting the Grimmsnarl in the stomach," he said. "It deeply weakened it. How did you know to do that?"

Daisy's eyes fell. She sighed deeply as she looked to the unconscious Grimmsnarl with a long, forlorn gaze.

"I had a mate who was a Grimmsnarl," she said quietly. "He and I used to spar a lot and during that time, he shared a lot of secret techniques to use against his kind. Of course, he was actually good at protecting his stomach."

"Oh. I did not realize you have a mate," Blot said, genuinely surprised.

"'Had', as in 'a long time ago, but not anymore'," Daisy replied.

She gave the Grimmsnarl one last stare, then went to attend Ceylon, who was just now righting himself up and weakly munching on an oran. Blot couldn't help but keep staring at the downed beast. In truth, he could easily see Daisy being mates with one of these hideous beasts. The Corvisquire's limited, violent interactions with it showed just how strong and formidable they were. He could imagine this Grimmsnarl mate could have easily kept up with Daisy's own violent outbursts.

He wondered what could have happened to Daisy's mate and why she never spoke of him.

Chapter 4

It had been a year now. One year had passed since Blot disappeared into Whispering Abyss. By this point, Rena realized there was nothing she could do. If her missing teammates really wanted to abandon the mission, they would have done so already. She had no plan to save them. All she could do at this point was wait for them to return, however long it would take. She imagined Gallows and Adamant both knew her thoughts, considering they didn't pester her about what she intended to do about Blot and the others. However, she still felt that it was about time she officially told them her thoughts on the matter. Perhaps it would put an end to Adamant's late night ventures to the café. About once a week now, when she went out for her morning song, she'd find the Vaporeon passed out in front of the guild.

But first, she would see the Guildmaster. She had received a message he wanted to speak with her at her earliest convenience. So after her team returned from the day's mission, she paid him a visit.

The Guildmaster's room wasn't particularly special despite being the room of the most important Pokémon in the entire guild. The only thing of note was how he decorated the room in a number of mementos from days long ago, when the Guildmaster used to be an explorer in his youth. These items lined the walls, such as a beautiful pink flower identical to the ones Shaymin adored, an old, rusting music box, a small stone with a musical note etched into its surface, and a mysterious orb that flickered with black flame. Rena had always admired his collection and one day hoped to emulate it herself. However, as of now, she had nothing worth cherishing.

Standing there atop a carpet was the Guildmaster himself, a mighty Haxorus named Axis. Accompanying him was his young Ninetales apprentice, Pyre. Rena believed that the Ninetales had just evolved

not even a week ago, so some of his fur had not turned completely gold.

"Welcome, Rena," Axis said with a warm smile. "I'm quite glad you've come. Please, do make yourself comfortable."

The Altaria wasn't sure how she was supposed to do that, but didn't point it out. Instead she fluffed her feathers and stood before the two cautiously. They both eyed her, Axis keeping a composed, almost imposing stance as all dragons did while Pyre stood at his side, occasionally averting his gaze with a shy frown. It was clear that Pyre didn't want to be there, but had no choice. He would be replacing Axis one day, so he had to learn all he could until the time came. That included the rather unfortunate conversation that was to ensue.

"How have you been, Rena?" Axis asked.

"Fine," she said. "My team and I have been working hard as usual. We just returned from a kill quest involving a rather pesky swarm of Combee and their queen."

"Ah yes, annoying little bugs those are," Axis said with a chuckle. "I certainly hope none of you were bit too severely."

"No, we were fine," Rena assured. "I had some honey stuck to my feathers after the ordeal, but Adamant was able to douse it off me."

"Good, good," Axis mused.

Rena didn't like this small talk. She wished he would get to the point already so she could return back to her teammates and have her own talk with them. Thankfully, the Haxorus delayed the conversation no further as he gave a deep sigh. He stepped up to the Altaria, his eyes forlorn and his gait unwavering.

"It's been a year now since your Corvisquire member has disappeared into Whispering Abyss, hasn't it?" he asked her.

"Yes," Rena said quietly.

"Followed immediately after by your Bulbasaur member, followed by your Granbull member two weeks afterwards, am I correct?" he asked.

"... yes," Rena answered, her voice even quieter.

Pyre shifted uncomfortably in the background as Axis tented his claws and gave the little Altaria a solemn stare. She couldn't help but shrink beneath the gaze of the towering dragon.

"I understand you must miss them dearly," Axis then said. "However, I do believe I've given you enough time to grieve for your loss. It's time for me to remove your missing members from your team roster."

Rena's heart sank. She looked up at the Haxorus, expecting him to take back what he had said. However, she saw those stern, unmoving eyes and knew he meant exactly what he had said.

"But... but I..." she babbled, her voice trembling with every word.

"You must understand that Team Skystreaker is currently registered as having six members," Axis said, her frailty unable to break the strength in his voice. "There are currently only three members in your team. This guild does not allow for phantom members. Normally I would allow five years for members to return, but your team has a... special case."

"They're coming back..." Rena said weakly. "They're not phantom members... they'll be back eventually."

"I beg to differ, Rena," the Haxorus said simply. "Those who enter Whispering Abyss often don't emerge for a very long time. If I had to estimate, your team members are probably only just finished the first floor of the dungeon at this point in time."

Rena shuddered. Only one floor after an entire year.

"I'm afraid the records will need to be changed. Team Skystreaker, as of now, has a three Pokémon roster," he then said.

"Guildmaster Axis..." Rena said feebly. "There's a chance they'll be back in a few years, if they don't have to go that far. If it's approximately one year for every floor..."

"Unfortunately, you and I both know that is not the case," Axis said gravely. "It's more likely to think your members will be gone for fifty years minimum. You and I are both well aware why that is."

Rena found herself at a loss for words.

"Don't worry, your team won't need to be separated and put on other teams," Axis then assured. "Three members is still enough to make a full team. However, we will have to move you and your members to another living quarters. It's much too big for only a three-Pokémon team. There are other teams in need of it."

Rena cast a desperate stare to Pyre, hoping he'd sway the Haxorus over. However, the Ninetales only stared back at her with a mournful, pitiful gaze. He was nothing more than a spectator. Rena's heart sank deeper into her chest, closer to the consuming void that had manifested itself the day Blot disappeared.

The dragon placed a clawed hand on the bird's head.

"I truly am sorry, Rena," he told her. "Truly, I am. Know I don't want to do this anymore than you do."

She wanted to say he wasn't and was offering empty condolences, but she held back her tongue. Instead, she shrugged off his claw with a wing.

"Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?" she asked.

"Yes, that is all," he said with a nod.

"Then I'm going back to my team," she said. "What remains of it anyway."

"Of course," Axis replied. "And fret not, you'll still have your current room for some time. It will take a few days to make the arrangements for your new room."

Rena nodded and headed for the door. However, just before she could step out, a sudden thought came to her. A sinister thought, something that had been eating away at the back of her mind ever since she lost Daisy, struck her with full force then.

"Guildmaster..." she said quietly.

"Yes?" he asked, ever so patient.

"If a whole team disappears for years because of a dungeon... do you remove the team from your guild?" she asked, turning back to watch his response.

The dragon's unwavering, stoic expression didn't change. Instead, he only swiveled his tail thoughtfully.

"Yes," he answered. "If an entire guild team doesn't return from a Mystery Dungeon after twenty-five years, then they are removed from the team rosters. We give the team as a whole more time to return considering that often, teams divide the work and only portions of the team enter part dungeons with extreme amounts of time dilation."

"I see," Rena said simply.

She held her gaze with the Haxorus a moment longer, then left without another word.

Rena returned to her team's room to find Adamant lounging in his pond. Gallows was nowhere to be found. When she entered, the

Vaporeon gave her a quick look, but did nothing more to acknowledge her presence.

"The Guildmaster spoke with me just now..." Rena said glumly, bowing her head as she closed the door. "He's changing our status so that we only have three members to our team."

The Vaporeon blinked, remaining silent. Rena approached his pool and sat beside him at the water's edge. Within her reflection, she could see several feathers poking out of her plumage at odd, unsightly angles. She didn't hesitate to pluck them out.

"It's like old times now, I suppose," she sighed. "Just you, me, and Gallows..."

"... you no longer have an interest in saving Blot, Ceylon, and Daisy?" Adamant asked, his voice empty, but not accusing.

"No, I don't," Rena answered softly. "I've spent this past year mulling over what to do. Jirachi won't be awake for another three hundred years, there haven't been any Celebi sightings in decades, and Arceus won't answer my prayers. I've even considered commissioning Pokémon to go down to Whispering Abyss and retrieve Blot and the others... but I already know that won't work."

"So then you intend to simply wait for them," Adamant stated.

"I am," Rena admitted ruefully. "It feels like I'm abandoning them, but... I don't know what else to do."

A strange glint flickered in the Vaporeon's eyes then. He rolled onto his back and floated passively in the water, all the while staring up at the ceiling.

"You can always go down there yourself," he said vacantly. "They shouldn't have gone far if you leave now. You should catch up to them relatively quickly."

"Adamant... no, I can't," Rena said mournfully. "I can't do that... I have to stay here. Someone has to be here for you and Gallows."

"Then again, it doesn't matter too much," he said, ignoring her words. "Every floor makes the time dilation exponentially worse. If a day passes on the outside after exploring the first floor, then a week passes after exploring the second floor. You could probably wait twenty years before entering the dungeon and still catch up to them relatively easily."

Rena bit her tongue. Yes, she knew that. Every dungeon was this way. However, Whispering Abyss already had such a massive time dilation from the very beginning. If it already took one year to clear the first floor, she could only imagine how long it would take to finish the next one.

Adamant gave a long sigh as he closed his eyes and let all but his head melt into the water.

"I miss them, Rena," he said quietly. "I didn't think I cared about them that much, but the world isn't the same without them."

"I miss them too," she said in return. "There's not a day I hope that I'll wake up to find this is all a bad dream."

"We're never going to see them again, are we?" Adamant then asked.

Rena didn't have the heart to answer him. Silence filled the void between them for many minutes before Adamant made a hoarse choking sound. Rena looked over to find tears forming in his eyes. However, before she could comfort him, the Vaporeon disappeared completely into the water.

With a heavy heart, Rena stayed beside the pond, ready to console him if he needed it.

He didn't resurface for the rest of the night.

Whispering Abyss B2F

The new floor didn't provide a change in scenery. The massive black cliffs still towered around Blot and his team, trapping them in the labyrinth. No one was surprised; plenty of Mystery Dungeons were the same all the way through. Only some of the large ones would change every few floors, such as first appearing to be a forest before turning into a wasteland ten floors in.

Blot kept the lead as the team traversed the dungeon. He felt relieved that he had successfully completed the first floor relatively quickly, but knew he couldn't feel that way for long. Dungeon always lurked just around the corner. It wanted to keep Blot far away from the Mareep.

Actually, the Mareep had a name now. His name was Blitz. That was that Duskull had said. He shuddered to think it, but he finally realized she wasn't a hallucination. She was very much real, otherwise she couldn't have summoned that Grimmsnarl and made the stairway disappear. It still didn't explain why no one else could see her, but Blot had a feeling it was because she didn't want to be seen by the others. She only wanted Blot to see her and most likely not for benevolent reasons.

He wanted to think that he would never see her again, but he knew better. He'd run into her again whether he liked it or not. She was probably watching him right now and waiting for the opportune time to reappear. He tried to calm himself by saying she hadn't brought him any harm yet. It was true that she had sent the Grimmsnarl after him, but only because he angered her. If the phantom remained agreeable, she'd remain harmless. Hopefully.

He looked back at his team to find them keeping close behind. He quickly noticed that Ceylon frowning glumly, his eyes glazed over as he simply followed behind the Corvisquire. Daisy didn't seem to notice his mood, as she was too busy keeping a diligent eye out for more dungeon apparitions.

"Something the matter, Ceylon?" Blot asked.

The Bulbasaur's ears perked up. He forced a smile onto his face and laughed.

"Oh, I'm fine," he assured. "Was just daydreaming, that's all."

Blot didn't believe him one bit. And as it turned out, Daisy thought the same. She brought her gaze to the little Bulbasaur and frowned disapprovingly.

"I don't know about that," Daisy said. "You do look a little off right now, now that Blot mentions it."

"I'm fine, really," Ceylon stated, though the firmness in his voice wavered.

The two older Pokémon kept their stares on the Bulbasaur, not buying his words one bit. Ceylon wore his plastic smile a little longer, then finally gave up with a long sigh.

"Okay fine, you got me," Ceylon conceded. "I am feeling a little down right now. It's the Grimmsnarl. It beat me up with one kick. I felt like it tore my soul right out of my body. I couldn't do anything! I felt so weak and helpless just watching you guys fight him without me..."

"It felt like someone punched your soul out because that's basically what happened," Daisy explained. "Grimmsnarl have another nasty little ability where they can hit you so hard that it actually breaks your spirit. First time I got hit with one of those, it was so bad that I had an out of body experience. You can't really do anything when that happens, so you don't have to feel bad about it."

"Still," Ceylon mumbled as he stared at the ground. "I hate being weak. I don't want to be a burden to you guys."

"You are not weak," Blot stated resolutely. "You are only ten years old. I am twenty-one and Daisy is in her forties. We have only had

more time to grow stronger than you have."

"Well actually I'm fifty-five, but glad to think I look much younger," Daisy said with a giggle.

"Regardless, Daisy and I have had many more years to grow than you," Blot went on, dismissing Daisy's remark with a flourish of his wing. "We have had much more time to hone our skills and become the capable Pokémon we are today. You are still a child. You have only recently left behind your comfortable life where you undoubtedly didn't need battle prowess."

"I guess," Ceylon shrugged.

Blot sighed. His words weren't helping. Truthfully, he didn't know what more to say that would lift the Bulbasaur's spirits. He had never been talented at comforting his teammates. Rena was always the one cheering up the team, wrapping them up in her fluffy embrace and nuzzling them softly if needed. She instinctually knew how to soothe the pain in anyone's heart.

"You know... I used to be really weak myself," Daisy said, her normally boisterous tone now mellow and soft. "You think you might be weak now, but back when I was your age, I couldn't even take a hit without crying for hours. Couldn't even bite a Lum Berry because it was too hard."

That got the Bulbasaur's attention. He looked up at the Granbull, perplexed and bewildered. Blot couldn't help but share the same expression.

"Really?" Ceylon gasped. "But... but... I've seen you wrestle Aggron to the ground!"

"Yeah, now," she chuckled. "Now I'm the brawn of the whole team. But back then... oh, I was such a weak little Snubbull. Everyone used to call me a runt and pick on me. They'd shove me around and I'd fall so easily and I'd cry, and then they'd all laugh at me. Ahhh... I

was so pathetic. I really looked forward to the day I'd evolve because it meant I wouldn't be so weak anymore. So when I finally became a Granbull a few years later, I was so happy. I really thought this would change my life.

"Except it didn't."

Her gaze fell. Ceylon and Blot patiently waited for her to continue as she mulled over the memories now swarming her mind.

"Becoming a Granbull did nothing," she said after a moment. "I was still just a weak little Pokémon. However, now it was even more pathetic since I was much bigger and scarier. I still couldn't bite down on a Lum berry without hurting my teeth. I still fell so easily when someone shoved me down. I still couldn't punch someone hard enough like my life depended on it. It was awful."

"Oh, I didn't know..." Ceylon said softly, treating the information with reverence. "You're always so strong, so I figured you always were..."

"Nah, I was just about the opposite," Daisy said with a shake of her head. "Feeble Daisy, they called me. Just like the flower I was named after, it was so easy to crush and break me."

"So then how did you get stronger?" Ceylon then asked.

"I trained," Daisy answered. "When it was obvious evolution wasn't going to fix my problems, I knew I had to take matters into my own paws. So I went to a sparring center near where I lived and fought against anyone I could there. They all knocked me down of course, real easily too. I can't even remember how many times someone would knock me out cold on accident."

A small smile formed across her face. Blot thought he saw the faintest glimmer of fondness in her eyes. A special sort of happiness he had never seen in Daisy before. A deep happiness that not all Pokémon could ever experience in their life.

"That's how I met Cackle," she said tenderly. "He was one of the regulars there. He was honestly... the reason I stayed. I would have long given up on growing stronger if he hadn't of been there. I kept getting knocked out every time I went, and so easily too. I really wanted to quit after about the fiftieth time I collapsed. But Cackle... he convinced me. He told me I'd get stronger eventually and that he didn't just believe it, but that he knew I would. He knew, as a fellow fairy, just how strong I'd be if I kept at it.

"And he was right. I did get stronger. It took a long time, but with persistence and encouragement from him, I was able to take hits and dish out pain. I truly lived up to the standard of a fearsome Granbull. All because that Grimmsnarl. All because he loved the way I squinted my eyes and roared when I punched something. He thought... it was the most adorable thing he had ever seen..."

Daisy closed her eyes and wiped them with her paws. Even though she tried to hide it, Blot could hear her sniffing.

"So that was your mate," Blot realized.

"Yeah," she answered quietly, still rubbing at her eyes. "I always thought his name was stupid. I always laughed when I heard it. But he liked hearing me laugh, so he didn't mind. He'd even do stupid things like say 'Here comes your Cackle, here for your cackles!' just to crack me up. Hah... oh gods... the things he'd say just so I'd laugh..."

She laughed then, desperately trying to sound happy, but instead coming off hollow and miserable and on the verge of a wail. Ceylon reached up with a vine and gently entwined it with one of her paws.

"I'm okay," Daisy said as she lowered her hands. "I just... I was just remembering old times."

"I understand," Ceylon said with a nod. "Well, thank you for telling me your story. I had no idea you used to be that way. I always figured you were a mighty Snubbull that toppled buildings with your

bare paws. Now that I know it wasn't always that way, it really gives me hope for myself."

"You'll be strong enough in no time," Daisy said kindly. "Maybe I was wrong and you really will be a Venusaur pretty soon as well."

"What happened to Cackle though?" he then asked. "How come you never talk about him?"

Daisy's ears drooped. She looked away from the Bulbasaur as she gently unwound his vine from her paw. Even though he couldn't see her face, Blot could feel the intense melancholy radiating from her body. It filled the entire corridor, grabbing onto anything it could and worming itself deep into the hearts of those it ensnared.

"... there was a freak accident at a sparring tournament," Daisy answered. "He always knew it might happen, just because of the way Pokémon are. He was fighting a Lucario and the Lucario hit him just hard enough in just the right spot and the healers didn't react fast enough..."

"And he died."

A year and six months had passed now since Blot first went into Whispering Abyss. Team Skystreaker had long been since removed from their spacious bedroom and were downgraded into one half its size. How fitting. Even still, it proved large enough for the three Pokémon, even if Rena's roosting spot was replaced with a pitiful branch protruding from the wall. Adamant himself wasn't allowed a pool to lounge in, the Guildmaster giving the excuse that small rooms weren't allowed any, but he didn't seem to mind. He seemed perfectly content to lounge in a bed of straw. Rena didn't know how he could possibly find that comfortable with the straw poking at him from every angle. However, he somehow slept through each and every night, never once moaning or grumbling.

That morning, Rena returned from her daily singing to find Adamant already awake. He was packing up the team bag, filling it with food, orbs, berries, and whatever else might be needed for the day. He struggled, having to grab and move everything with his mouth, but he managed with diligence. Rena quietly swooped down next to him and lent him her help, using her beak to hold the bag open.

"Thanks," he said as he continued placing items within the bag.

"Oh it's no problem," she said kindly. "I should be thanking you for taking care of this so early in the day, honestly."

Rena glanced behind the Vaporeon to find Gallows hovering in the darkest corner of the room, his soul-flame barely more than an ember.

"Gallows just came back, didn't he?" she asked.

"A few minutes ago, yes," Adamant nodded. "He went right to sleep after he came back. He didn't say a word."

This wasn't surprising. The team never saw Gallows at night anymore. He had given up on being diurnal for months now. Too often the team would come home from a mission to find Gallows slowly stirring from his slumber. Then, after sharing a few words with them, he'd depart and wouldn't return until just after dawn.

"At least he's taking night missions while he's awake," Rena said. "Otherwise, I would have had a real talk with him at this point. I'm sure you like having your space from him though, don't you Adamant? This must be a dream come true."

She laughed cheerfully, but Adamant didn't even crack a smile. He only continued his monotonous task, all while wearing a vacant expression. Rena couldn't help but wonder if he was simply still recovering from his venture into Zarude Café last night. Indigo from Team Venture had told her that he had seen the Vaporeon guzzle

quite a number of drinks, including leppa cider. She didn't even know how he was even awake if that was the case.

"I actually miss Gallows," Adamant then said. "I wish he would stop being nocturnal."

"Oh, well that's surprising to hear!" Rena replied. "You two never got along, even in the beginning."

"It's true, we don't see eye-to-eye," Adamant stated. "He annoys me on a number of levels, especially in the way he sees the world. However, I still miss him, probably because when you're around someone for that long, you can't help but get attached."

"Probably helps that he's incinerated all of the grass-types that went after you over the years," Rena added with a laugh.

"Probably," Adamant also chuckled. "He always had my back. He'd never abandon me, even when it was awfully convenient. After all, he's still here now even though he makes it obvious he doesn't mind losing himself to Whispering Abyss."

"That's just Gallows for you," Rena said teasingly. "He's a strange little ghostie, but he'll always be there. He's probably attached his soul to ours through an ethereal soul bond of some sort."

Adamant smiled a little he finished packing the last of the items. Rena closed the bag and helped put it around the Vaporeon's neck. She beamed at him as she lightly brushed him with her soft wings.

"Oh, I see that smile," she cooed. "I've missed that smile."

He turned away bashfully as he pushed aside her wing. Rena swiftly trapped him in a feathery hug as she crooned in his ear. Adamant couldn't resist laughing as he nuzzled her neck.

The two kept their embrace for many more moments, relishing the closeness between them. Then they left together for the day's

mission, the fondness in their hearts momentarily drowning out the heartbreak that hadn't begun to heal even after all this time.

Whispering Abyss B2F

Silence accompanied the trio as they continued their descent into the dungeon. Though Daisy's broken heart no longer swallowed up the group in its wallowing misery, it had effectively put Ceylon and Blot into a stupor. Now they didn't know how to approach the Granbull. The two of them had thought of her as nothing more than the volatile, boisterous one of the group, but with a single conversation, everything had changed. Now she was someone who had struggled her whole life to gain the strength she desperately craved. Through years and years of persistence she had finally obtained it... but at the price of losing a loved one.

It was with this realization that Blot finally understood why Daisy had joined the guild and perhaps even accompanied him in Whispering Abyss: Daisy no longer held anything dear. The world had taken away her mate, the very one who had helped her become so strong. It stripped her of her impetus, her reason to live. Of course she would see no issue in letting dungeons take away everything but her very life; she had nothing waiting for her in the outside world.

Maybe he and Daisy weren't so different after all in that regard, which made him feel all the more guilty about the way he thought of her before.

"Daisy," Blot said suddenly.

"Hmm?" she asked.

"I am sorry," he told her.

"For what?" she asked, frowning curiously.

"For not understanding you," he stated quietly. "I always presumed you to be brash and empty-minded. You annoyed me with your constant loudness. I thought that was all there was to you. I realize now that there is more. I realize I never truly knew you."

"Yeah... me too," Ceylon added meekly. "I always thought you were just a loud mouth with nothing between your ears. Boy was I wrong."

Daisy chuckled. She hastened her pace until she walked right beside the Corvisquire. She rubbed the back of his neck with a paw, which Blot found surprisingly gentle and comforting. He couldn't resist cooing softly. Daisy did the same to the top of Ceylon's bulb, causing him to smile warmly.

"Ahh, it's alright," she said with a reassuring smile. "I didn't mind everyone seeing me as the brute. Besides, I've done the same with you, Blot. I used to think you were pretty vapid. Thought you had no thoughts of your own and did whatever Rena told you to do. I don't even think I've seen you smile even once!"

"I cannot smile, I am a bird," Blot said pointedly.

"You know what I mean," Daisy taunted in jest. "Now I think there's a lot more to you. I started getting that feeling after I came after you. You wouldn't have come to this awful dungeon all alone if you were just an empty-minded little bird without a free will of your own."

"Maybe," Blot said absently.

"Oh, not gonna say anything, huh? That's fine," Daisy laughed knowingly. "I'll wait until you feel like it. I get the feeling you'll have a lot to say when the time comes."

Blot didn't say anything. However, deep down, he knew that she was right. Soon enough he'd tell her why he had come to Whispering Abyss despite the risks. She and Ceylon deserved to know if they had given up everything to be with him.

But it was not time. He wasn't ready to open that wound just yet.

Chapter 5

Nearly two years had passed since Blot entered Whispering Abyss.

Adamant and Rena returned from their mission well after the sun had set over Blackscale Guild. They had taken an escort mission to bring a Whismur to her aunt and uncle's home a few hours south. The Whismur's parents couldn't take her themselves since apparently they had both been injured from a recent encounter with some aggressive wilds. The journey itself had been rather uneventful, but the child had been something else.

"I never realized a child could ask so many questions for so long," Adamant grumbled as the two entered the guild. "I don't think she breathed the entire time she was with us because she talked so much."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," Rena laughed. "She was just excited about the little adventure we took her on."

"Didn't mean she had to bombard me with pointless questions she wouldn't even let me answer all the way through," Adamant pouted. "Why would a Whismur want to know why the sun sets in the west or why Combee make honey?"

"Like I said, she was excited," Rena told him. "And also curious. You would be surprised just how curious children are at that age. They want to know *everything*, even if we adults know it's not important."

"I sure don't remember being that talkative when I was a little Eevee..." Adamant muttered under his breath. "I knew to stay quiet and only talk when I had to..."

The two went into the mess hall and received their portions of dinner right before the kitchen was to close. Since neither of them had hands, a Magmar in the area gave his assistance in carrying their

food. After the Magmar set their food at a nearby table, the two ate their dinner in peace. Not many Pokémon were still around, except for one or two groups, allowing the two relative quiet.

The two dug into their plates, savoring their late meal of berry salad. Rena took her time picking out her favorite of the berries, the persim ones, while Adamant devoured each berry without care of which one it was.

"I just realized, I don't know what your favorite berry is," Rena said. "You never seem particularly fond of any certain berry."

"Oh, that's easy. My favorite is the grepa berry," Adamant answered after swallowing. "They're the perfect mix of sweet and sour. Unfortunately, they aren't here that often. At least, not as much as orans, cheris, and rawst."

"Unfortunately," Rena agreed. "Well then, it sounds like I'll be buying some grepas from the market next time I visit."

"You don't have to," Adamant said bashfully.

"I want to," Rena said with a cheery tune to her voice. "You're a good, dependable teammate, and I should repay you for your hard work."

"Well alright," Adamant said, smiling a little now. "If you are going to visit the market for berries, can you look for some mago and nanab berries as well? I haven't had one of those in a while."

"Oh? Aren't nanab really hard, though?" Rena asked. "I think I've heard a few stories of Pokémon chipping their teeth on them."

"I like to gnaw on them," Adamant confessed. "It feels good, like how I imagine it feels for you to chew on tree branches."

"I can't argue with that," Rena replied with a shrug. "I'll look for all three of those berries for you then. Hopefully the traveling merchants

who come in will have them."

Adamant smiled a little as he continued digging into his meal, slowly reducing the berries one by one. Rena joined him, enjoying the comforting quiet between them. After several minutes, Adamant finished his meal while Rena still had a few more berries to pluck up. She expected him to depart for the café, but to her surprise, he stayed seated across from her.

"Not going to head out?" she asked.

"Nah, not today," Adamant said with a wave of his paw. "I'll stay here at the guild for the night."

Rena beamed. This was wonderful. Now she didn't need to worry about him as she roosted. Perhaps she could take this as a sign that he would stop going to the café besides for the occasional visit with other teams. Granted, he didn't go to the café every single night, but this gave her hope. Perhaps it was the thought of Rena giving him his favorite berries. Perhaps that warmed his heart and filled the void that the drinks couldn't. She would most definitely need to find those berries now, without a doubt.

After Rena finished the rest of her meal, they headed off to their bedroom. The guild was quiet with only a few stray Pokémon heading to their rooms or checking the board for last minute posts. It seemed everyone else had already settled down after a long day's work. Rena still felt awake for the most part and Adamant seemed the same. She wondered if perhaps they should stay up a bit longer and facetiously plot for a way to build a pool in the room regardless of the rules.

The two arrived at their room just in time to find Gallows phasing out of their door. Rena expected him to give a quick hello before going on his way, but the Lampent stayed in front of the door, eying both of them with a strange expression Rena couldn't read.

"Oh good, you two are finally back," Gallows said. "I was starting to think you were both dead."

"Oh no, we were out late from a mission," Rena stated. "We had an escort mission that was quite a ways away."

"Hmm didn't get skinned alive by Pawniard then," Gallows mused. "Would be amusing to think you two came back to haunt me, but we all know that wouldn't happen."

Rena and Adamant both stared at him, unsure how to respond. The Lampent bobbed up and down as he gestured to the room.

"A guest came over while you two were gone," Gallows then said. "I've been entertaining her all afternoon. She's still inside, waiting for you to show up, Rena."

"A guest? Oh, I wonder who it could be," Rena said thoughtfully. "I don't know of anyone that would want to visit. Is it someone I know?"

"You'll see," Gallows said impishly.

"I certainly hope you haven't been terrorizing her," Adamant said flatly. "Not everyone can handle you, Gallows. Will I be finding a soulless husk when I open this door?"

"I'll have you know that I treat guests quite respectfully," the Lampent said haughtily. "If anything, you're the one to have tormented her by keeping her waiting all day. Now go along, the poor girl has been waiting long enough."

Gallows then drifted away, wandering deeper into the guild. After exchanging a quick glance with Adamant, Rena opened the door to find that there was indeed a guest sitting there in the middle of the room. It was a Warturtle who seemed preoccupied with gingerly brushing her claws through her lush, furry tail.

"Hello there!" Rena sang cheerily. "I heard you were waiting for me?"

The Wartortle flinched and hastily hurried to her feet. She clutched her tail tight to her chest, nervously toying with it as she looked at the ground.

"H-Hi," she stammered. "Y-You're... you're Re-Rena, right?"

"That's right," the Altaria said with a nod. "And you are?"

She started to approach the Wartortle, but the water-type started to tremble. Rena reluctantly kept her distance from the girl. Adamant stayed close to Rena and kept quiet for the guest's sake. It was painfully obvious how overwhelmed she was.

"I'm... I'm Riptide," the Wartortle mumbled.

She was so quiet, her voice barely above a whisper. Thankfully, Rena had sharp hearing, a gift to her kind from Arceus himself.

"Well nice to meet you Riptide!" Rena greeted. "Sorry I wasn't here sooner. I was out on a mission that took up all of today. I do hope you weren't too bored here."

"I-I was fine," Riptide assured weakly. "That Lampent... he kept me company. He was... he was a funny fellow."

"That he is," Rena laughed. "Regardless, I'm here now. So, what can I do for you, Riptide?"

The Wartortle grimaced. She flattened her ears against her head as she gripped her tail tighter. She even seemed to resist tucking her head into her shell. Rena had no idea what to make of the situation. She had never met a shy Wartortle before. A *painfully* shy one at that too. Every Wartortle she had ever known held themselves quite confidently. Granted, she had only seen two of them in her lifetime...

Riptide slowly brought her eyes to the Altaria.

"I... I came here to talk to you," the Wartortle said. "I... I want to join Team Skystreaker."

Rena couldn't resist gawking. In truth, Rena knew that something like this would happen. It had been quite a while since half her team was forcibly removed from the rosters. Of course adventurous Pokémon would find Team Skystreaker's name amongst the teams that had room for new recruits. It was inevitable someone new would want to join her dwindling team.

Even still, Rena couldn't hide her shock. The Wartortle shyly tucked her head into her shell, hiding her bashful face from the Altaria.

"Oh, well this is a surprise," Rena said, laughing nervously in hopes of soothing the poor girl. "I... It's been some time since I had someone that wanted to join. How come you want to join our team as opposed to any others?"

"... I don't know," Riptide mumbled from within her shell, barely audible.

"Surely there must have been some reason," Rena pressed. "Oh, did you maybe join because our team was the first name you saw?"

"Y-Yeah," Riptide answered. "I also liked that... you were small. But not too small. You were just right."

"Right, you'd make our fourth member if you joined," Rena admitted. "That's a fair reason."

The Wartortle slowly emerged from her shell and looked toward the Altaria, her cheeks flushed as she continued nervously toying with her tail.

Under normal circumstances, she would have declined Riptide and told her to join another team. She didn't look too young, at least not as young as Ceylon, but her bashfulness could prove to be a huge liability. Rena couldn't afford any emotionally compromised individuals on her team. Then although it was petty, Riptide didn't fit in well with the "Skystreaker" name. Sure, Ceylon, Adamant, and Daisy couldn't fly either, but they had proven themselves competent

enough. Rena always told herself if she let another Pokémon join the team, they had to have some airborne abilities. Rena certainly didn't see Riptide soaring through the skies any time soon.

However, Rena knew that she did need another team member. She and Adamant could use extra help during the day. She'd especially be useful, considering she had actual hands, something they lost the moment Daisy went after Blot. She also couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor girl. Riptide had waited all day to speak with Rena and it would surely crush her to be rejected.

"I will admit I'm not entirely sure what to think of you," Rena said. "May I ask why you want to join the guild in the first place?"

"... I thought being in a guild would be a good thing," Riptide answered quietly. "Everyone looks so brave and I... I want to be like that. And... And your guild has living quarters for its members, which is nice. Not many other guilds have that."

"And how do you feel about being in the Mystery Dungeons?" Rena then asked. "You understand that if you enter one... you'll potentially be gone for years, right?"

"Yeah, I know," Riptide said with a slow nod. "I... I don't mind. I'm a Wartortle and well... I live a long time. So does my whole family. We can... live thousands of years. So if I came back a hundred years from now... it's not bad."

"I thought that was a myth, that Wartortle can live ten thousand years," Rena laughed.

Riptide averted her eyes, too shy to speak more. Rena sighed. At least Riptide understood the dangers of dungeons. That was promising. She also had a decent reason to join the team. Joining a guild for the sake of growing into a stronger Pokémon was respectable.

Rena looked to Adamant, gauging his reaction. He didn't seem to be wary of the Wartortle, but he showed no signs of eagerness either. He simply had no reaction at all with his dark eyes betraying no emotion.

"What do you think of Riptide, Adamant?" she asked.

"... She's fine," the Vaporeon answered, his voice just as blank as his eyes. "I don't see a reason for why she can't be with us."

"Okay," Rena said with a nod. "I'd ask Gallows himself, but considering we hardly see him anymore..."

Rena turned back to the Wartortle, who anxiously awaited the Altaria's response.

"Well Riptide," Rena said after thinking a moment. "I think you'd make a fine addition to our team."

A smile broke out on the Wartortle's face.

"Y-You mean it?" she asked.

"I do," Rena said with a nod. "Welcome to Team Skystreaker."

Riptide gave a loud wallop and ran toward the Altaria. Rena barely had time to react before the Wartortle gave her a big hug, burying her face deep into Rena's neck.

"Thank you! Oh thank you!" she cried. "I promise, I'll be a good teammate! I'll make you proud!"

Rena crooned softly as she enveloped the girl in her wings. Yes, it did feel good to have a new teammate. She wouldn't be the same as Ceylon, or Daisy, or Blot, but Riptide would bring her own strengths to the team.

The Altaria turned to Adamant and beckoned him to come over. And though the Vaporeon didn't hesitate to join the hug, something wasn't

right in his eyes.

For just a brief moment, the black pools of his eyes seemed darker than ever. They seemed like the black bottomlessness of the abyss.

Riptide proved to be a valuable asset to the team, just as Rena hoped.

Despite her perpetual bashfulness, Riptide knew how to be a dependable teammate. She stayed close to Rena and Adamant on their missions, never wandering far from them or starting useless chatter. She knew when to stay quiet and to simply enjoy the silence between the three of them. She also knew how to effectively pack the team's bag of all the items they needed and worked twice as quickly as Rena and Adamant. Not only that, but she had a good intuition for which items to select for the day. Adamant and Rena had always packed a bit of everything before choosing a mission to cover all their bases, but Riptide had changed that. She only packed after the mission was selected and only chose items that she felt worked best for their mission. If they were going on a kill quest, she packed hordes of seeds and refused to let a single orb inside the bag. If they were doing an escort mission, she would pack several oran and lum berries, and depending on how she felt, maybe a few rawst or pecha berries. If they were delivering goods per the guild's request, then Riptide would only pack apples and nothing more.

Adamant and Rena had been reluctant to have their supplies changed so drastically, but they quickly learned Riptide to trust her after each mission went uneventfully and never found themselves without an item they desperately needed. By day five, they had made her the official bagkeeper for the team. It certainly helped that she was the only one who could carry the bag correctly. The bag always hung awkwardly over Adamant and Rena's sides and constantly bumped into their feet or wings, no matter how they adjusted it.

Of course, she was still shy. She still didn't speak nearly as much as she should have. The only time she really spoke was when packing the supplies and softly assuring that they had everything they needed. Otherwise, she was as quiet as could be, only giving nods in response to any questions directed toward her. She would eat dinner with them of course, but wouldn't say a word the whole meal. This made it difficult for the team to connect with her, but they knew this was only temporary. Eventually Riptide would come out of her shell. Eventually she'd gain the courage she craved. It would just take time.

Now it had been four weeks since Riptide had joined the team. The trio was just returning from their mission, a relatively simple one where Adamant and Riptide helped pull a boat down a river. Apparently a few of the usual ferry Pokémon weren't feeling well and there was a need for replacements for the day. All they needed to do was join a crowd of water-types in a net-like contraption that had one end connected to the boat and the other end submerged in the river. They would all swim together in this net and with their combined might, they'd pull the boat along. It proved an easy enough task for the both of them while Rena enjoyed gliding alongside the boat.

"Well that was rather fun!" Rena said as they entered the guild. "I don't remember the last time I had such an enjoyable mission."

"I'll admit it felt nice to swim for an entire day," Adamant said with a smile. "I felt right where I belonged. Maybe I should consider becoming a ferry fish."

"Oh but what would we do without you?" Rena teased. "You're irreplaceable!"

Adamant chuckled. Rena thought she saw a glimmer of something in his eyes, but it vanished just as quickly as it appeared. Rena turned to Riptide, who seemed to be paying attention to fellow guild members passing them by.

"You have fun today, Riptide?" she asked.

"O-Oh!" the Wartortle cried, quickly snapping to attention. "I-I did! I like swimming... it's relaxing..."

"I'm sure it is," Rena beamed. "I imagine it's very quiet in the water. You probably don't hear a sound while you're down there and can let your thoughts drift freely."

"Yeah," Riptide said with a little smile. "It's quiet down there. You only hear white noise in your ears. It feels... nice. Un-Until someone talks anyway... water-types can still talk in the water..."

"I heard about that from someone," Rena replied. "I still don't know how you guys can do that. I always thought the water would muffle your voices."

The Altaria waited for Riptide to give an explanation, but the Wartortle remained silent. Rena couldn't help but sigh internally. She had hoped the conversation would make Riptide talk, but it seemed she wasn't ready. Perhaps next time she'd speak more.

The three entered their living quarters to find Gallows slumbering in the darkest corner of the room, as per usual. Rena and Adamant ignored him, but Riptide couldn't help but stare with a befuddled look. Rena couldn't blame her. Though Riptide knew exactly why Gallows currently slept and why he never accompanied them on missions, she probably wasn't used to him bobbing silently in the darkness. Rena also had a suspicion that the Wartortle had never even seen a ghost before, making Gallows's presence an enticing sight.

Rena fluffed her feathers as Adamant crawled onto his bed. He stretched out his paws for a moment before lying across the hay, yawning peacefully.

"Going to bed already?" Rena asked.

"Yeah. I'm quite tired and the Corphish tails the captain gave me filled my stomach," Adamant replied.

"Oh, well okay," Rena said, slightly disappointed. "I guess Riptide and I will have dinner by ourselves then."

"A-Actually," Riptide then said as she nervously set the bag down in its designated area. "I'm full too. I'm... I'm going to sleep as well. Swimming is fun... but it's tiring too."

"Oh," Rena said. "Well, okay, that's fine. If you two would prefer to sleep, then I'll let you. I'll simply have dinner by myself, though maybe I'll happen upon Team Swiftpaws. I heard they got a new member who seems to be a curious little fellow. An Indeedee I believe."

"You'll have to tell us about him," Adamant said. "If he's interesting, of course."

Rena beamed softly at her teammates, then left the room. She shut the door quietly behind her, leaving the three Pokémon alone amongst themselves. Gallows didn't stir from his slumber, though he would undoubtedly be waking soon.

Adamant rolled onto his side and nestled his head into his tail. There was no reason to do this anymore; his tail was no longer fluffy and definitely didn't keep him warm. However, he couldn't break the habit. He had been doing it for years as an Eevee and evolving certainly wouldn't change a thing.

He started to close his eyes when he noticed Riptide approaching him. He watched as she sat down before him, holding her tail close to her chest. That bashful look of hers seemed more flustered than usual.

"Th-Thanks for the help today," she stuttered out. "You know... with the net. It was good to have someone... I knew with me. I don't... I don't like being so close to so many strangers."

Adamant was about to say that was ironic considering she had joined a guild team knowing it was full of strangers she would be in

close proximity to all the time, but kept his mouth shut. She'd be hurt if he said that. She wasn't like Gallows who could easily deflect a tactless comment and dish out one in return.

"No problem," Adamant said instead.

She stroked her tail, running her claws deep into its fur as she frowned uncomfortably.

"Adamant... am I a good teammate?" she asked.

"Of course you are," he stated without hesitation. "You've proven to be quite competent. I'm honestly surprised how quickly you have adjusted considering you've never worked for a guild before."

"Well I... I just wonder because... I just haven't done much," she said with folded ears. "All I do is... take care of the bag. I let you and Rena fight for me and... and I don't take the lead. I'm... I'm just always carrying the bag."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Adamant assured. "We do need someone to carry the bag. Rena and I have a difficult time doing so ourselves. It certainly helps that you have hands. We really needed someone who with hands after Daisy..."

He stopped himself as the painful memories slowly flooded his mind. The heartbreak he was learning to cope with day by day began to feel raw again. It ached in his chest, yearning for his lost teammates. He held back the tears forming in his eyes.

"You're fine, Riptide," he told her, forcing the sorrow out of his voice. "You're still new. You're a good Pokémon and a wonderful teammate."

"You mean it?" she asked quietly, unsure if she could believe him.

"I do," he said earnestly.

The Wartortle smiled softly. She released her tail as she hugged him around the neck. Adamant flinched at her sudden touch, but didn't push her away. He instead let her hold him, feeling her cold scales against his own.

He wanted to shirk away, to push her aside and tell her to leave him be. But he couldn't.

"Thanks Adamant," she whispered into his ear.

He hoped she would only embrace him for a few more moments and then retire to her own bed. However, she remained by his side, arms entwined around his head. It was only when she fell asleep by his side did she finally release him.

The Vaporeon let the Wartortle sleep in his bed and went over to hers. He patted down the straw just right before settling into it. He rubbed himself against the bed, trying to shake off the feeling of Riptide's form pressing against his own. Eventually he would no longer feel it. Eventually the reawakened heartache would vanish with it.

He didn't stop scratching against the hay until he finally fell asleep.

Adamant found himself in a strange place. In fact, he hesitated to even call it a place. It was more like a void where only an endless sea of black and violet surrounded him. There was no ground, there was no sky. Only these dreadful shades enveloped him. He felt unbearably alone here in this nothingness, this oblivion deep within his mind.

Yes, this was a dream. He knew it was. However, it had been some time since his dreams had been this oppressive. The last time he truly had a dream this dark and dreary... was when he first evolved.

Then he saw them. He saw his old teammates lingering deeper in the darkness. There stood Blot, impassive as he always was, Ceylon

with that cheerful smile of his, and Daisy scowling and pensive. He walked toward them, but they only seemed to grow further away. Their forms sank deeper into the black, shrouding more of their bodies.

Adamant hurried his pace, but it did little good. More and more of his teammates seeped into the void, losing themselves to it. It wasn't long before the darkness swallowed them completely, leaving Adamant all alone. Yet he kept running. He would find them. They couldn't have disappeared forever.

So he ran and he ran. Even when his feet ached and his back hurt from the constant flapping movements of his tail, he ran. Nothing could stop him from finding his teammates.

Because they couldn't be gone. They'd come back. They had to. They wouldn't be lost forever to the abyss. No one had to replace them.

But no matter how far he went, his teammates never returned. They had been lost forever, stolen away by the cruelty of the void. Only he dwelled in this miserable place, alone, tired, and heartbroken.

His body could take no more. He collapsed in a heap, panting breathless and crying profusely. Tears streamed down his cheeks and pooled beneath him. He couldn't remember the last time he wept this much.

"I knew it, you never got over losing them," came a new voice. "You were just putting up a façade, just as you always do. But alas, Riptide broke that flimsy facade, didn't she?"

Adamant stared down into the puddle of his tears. Someone stared back. It wasn't his reflection.

The Lampent emerged from the tears and hovered before the Vaporeon, shaking his head disapprovingly. Adamant snarled as he swiftly wiped away his tears.

"Gallows..." he said through bared fangs.

"I bet you're wondering how I'm here," he said simply, indifferent to the Vaporeon's fierce display. "I suppose now's a good time to tell you that I've been making a habit of visiting Pokémon in their dreams for some time. For years, actually. I don't visit every night of course... at least, not your dreams specifically. There's a good many Pokémon in the guild, let me tell you."

"So then this really is you talking to me," Adamant growled, his facial fins now fanning aggressively. "This isn't just a dream version of you."

"That's right," Gallows said a little too happily.

"*Get out,*" Adamant said venomously as he quickly rose to his feet. "You better pray I don't remember this when I wake up."

But the Lampent seemed unfazed. He only floated in place, unimpressed with Adamant's threats. Like Adamant was nothing more than a little child threatening Kyogre himself. Adamant squeezed his eyes shut and tried to force himself awake, but nothing happened. He remained in the bleak void with Gallows, the dream world refusing to release its hold on him. Or perhaps it was Gallows keeping Adamant in the dream. If he could willingly enter the dreams of others, it was very likely he knew how to manipulate them as well.

"I'm sure you must think I'm here to taunt you, to tell you how pathetic you're being right now," Gallows stated as he circled the Vaporeon. "That's such an easy conclusion to come to, considering all that I've said since Blot ventured into Whispering Abyss."

"It's a likely reason you're here, invading my dream," Adamant shot back. "I can hardly think of a benevolent reason for you to do that."

"Well I hate to say this, but I'm actually not here for the reasons you suspect," Gallows said. "I'm here because this has gone on for far too long and it's depressing to watch."

"What's been happening for too long?" Adamant asked tersely.

"Watching you refuse to accept how miserable you really are," Gallows answered gravely.

Adamant was taken aback. He honestly had thought Gallows would say something more mean-spirited. He had grown to expect that from the impish ghost. He hadn't expected something like this, something said with no hint of malice. The rawness of his statement left the Vaporeon stunned and speechless. For once, he had no comeback to the Lampent.

"It was obvious the moment you kept going to that café," Gallows went on. "Don't pretend you bought those drinks for any other reason than to dull the pain. I'm sure you resented your Vaporeon evolution even more than you normally did because of how much your body diluted those numbing chemicals. But you kept drinking and you kept drowning the pain so you wouldn't have to feel it. All because you couldn't accept that you will never see your teammates again."

"... I stopped after a while," Adamant said after a moment. "I haven't visited the café for some time."

"That is true, and maybe you thought you were finally happy again," Gallows replied. "Maybe you actually were for a short while. But all of that changed the moment Riptide joined the team."

"That's not true," Adamant stated with a stamp of his paw.

"Is it?" Gallows asked. "Tell me Adamant, when Riptide joined our team... did it make you realize just how much we've forgotten about the others? Why, when's the last time we ever mentioned Blot, Ceylon, or Daisy? Have any of us even told poor Riptide about our former members? Or does she think that we three are the only ones to have ever been a part of Team Skystreaker?"

"We... we don't talk about them because they're not coming back," Adamant answered quietly. "There's no point in remembering them anymore."

"Except you don't want that," Gallows pressed. "You don't want that, because they're not really gone. They're only inside a Mystery Dungeon. We've only 'lost' them in that they won't be returning in our lifetime."

Adamant didn't say anything. Gallows scoffed as he loomed closer to the Vaporeon.

"You don't want to forget them because they're not really gone," Gallows stated. "You want them to come back already. Riptide's presence contradicts that wish. Her presence acknowledges... that we are replacing them."

Adamant felt the tears returning. He quickly averted his gaze so Gallows wouldn't see his weakness. But the Lampent only swooped back into his vision and waited for the Vaporeon's words. He seemed very patient, as if he had all the time in the world. He showed no joy in exposing this awful truth, only an odd solemnness that Adamant didn't think the ghost was capable of.

"... I want them back," Adamant admitted somberly. "I miss them, Gallows. I miss them every single day. I know Rena meant no harm in letting Riptide join the team... but she's replacing them. She's trying to fill the void that Blot, Ceylon, and Daisy left behind with that Warturtle. And I... I don't want that. I want our old teammates back and only them."

"And there it is," Gallows said simply. "There's the truth."

"... What does it matter that I've admitted how miserable I am?" Adamant asked hollowly. "I can't do anything about it."

"Are you sure about that?" Gallows asked ominously.

Adamant looked up to find the Lampent staring at him with a strange, haunting look. His soul-flame waned and flickered eerily as a crackling sound filled the void around them.

"As I said, they're not truly gone," Gallows said. "They're only inside Whispering Abyss. If you truly do want them back... you know exactly what you need to do."

With a flare of his flame, the Lampent vanished, leaving the Vaporeon alone within his dream.

Chapter 6

Riptide awoke to the sound of a loud wail.

She snapped to her feet. It was morning now. She still found herself in Adamant's bed, but the Vaporeon was nowhere to be found. Instead, she found Rena standing where the team bag was usually kept, her face hidden from Riptide's view. For whatever reason, the bag wasn't there anymore.

Rena turned her gaze to the Wartortle, showing that her eyes were red and puffy. The bird staggered back, as if suddenly frightened of Riptide.

"Oh... I... sorry I didn't mean to wake you," the Altaria said quickly. "I just... I'm sorry, I need to go out for a while."

Without another word, the bird swiftly took off and hurried out the window, taking the note with her. Riptide could only stand there, at a loss of what had just happened. Something had upset Rena, that much was obvious. However, Riptide didn't know what it could be. Everything had been fine yesterday and the weather seemed pleasant from what Riptide could see out the window. Maybe Rena had received troubling news from the guild and that was what the letter was all about.

She looked to the dark corner of the room to find Gallows slumbering. At least, that's what he wanted everyone to think. Riptide could tell that he was very much awake. His soul-flame moved too vigorously for a resting fire-type. Anytime a fire-type of any kind slept, their fire would either shrink to a candle flame or go out completely. The fire of these Pokémon always gave away their true feelings. That's a lesson Riptide was forced to learn from her father, a hulking Charizard no one in her hometown would dare upset.

Riptide approached the ghost and stopped before him. She saw his soul-flame flicker curiously.

"G-Gallows," she said. "Wh-What happened to Rena?"

The Lampent's eyes manifested along his glassy face. She expected him to pretend he had just woken up, but he didn't. He only gave her a solemn stare.

"She's upset because Adamant left," he told her.

"Wh-What do you mean he left?" Riptide asked weakly.

"He left the team," Gallows stated plainly. "Last night, while you and Rena slept, he took the team's bag and went to Whispering Abyss."

"Isn't that... that Mystery Dungeon that has the worst time dilation in the world...?" Riptide asked.

"Yes, yes it is," Gallows said.

Riptide's heart sank deep into her shell. She grabbed her tail and dug her claws into it, desperately staving off a panic attack. She couldn't believe this. She had just seen him yesterday and he seemed perfectly fine. He seemed happy with his team, at least with Rena. Especially when she brought him these berries that he loved so much. He showed no signs of wanting to do something so drastic as to abandon his team. Not only that, but she couldn't understand what could compel anyone to venture into a dangerous dungeon.

She desperately searched for a reason and through her erratic and frantic thoughts, she found one. One that she personally was responsible for. A dark shudder went through her being.

"Did... did he leave because of me?" Riptide asked frailly, tucking her head into her shell as she spoke. "Did... did he think I had a crush on him and... and... and I scared him off?"

Now the guilt really settled in. Of course, that's exactly what had happened. Adamant had taken last night's conversation the wrong way. He had thought that she wanted his validation for being a good teammate because she cared about his opinion and only his. He had thought she was going to use it as a platform to confess to him. Her extended embrace had only given him the proof he needed.

"I... I don't like him like that, I swear!" Riptide cried frantically. "I just... he's the only other water-type on the team... you get that, right? If there was another ghost-type on the team, you'd feel closer to them than the others. I just... I just wanted to know if I was doing a good job... I swear, that's it!"

"Oh Riptide, he didn't leave because he thought you were infatuated with him," Gallows said with a shake of his head. "He knows better than that."

"Then why?" Riptide demanded desperately as she brought her head back out. "Why did he leave? I had to be the reason. It had to be because of what I said. This... this is my fault. I was all awkward toward him and he left because of me!"

"Oh he left because of you alright," Gallows then said in an ominous tone. "But it wasn't because he thought you were in love with him."

"Then... then what was the reason?" she begged. "What did I do?! Please, tell me!"

Gallows made something resembling a sighing sound. He glanced out the window, perhaps to see if Rena was returning, before bringing his gaze back to Riptide.

"I suppose someone on this team ought to tell you the truth, considering Rena sure won't," he said distastefully. "You don't deserve to be kept in the dark regarding this unfortunate situation now that it's escalated this far."

Riptide braced herself. She held her tail closer to her shell as she held her breath. She had always suspected something wasn't right about Team Skystreaker, but she never had the courage to ask. It was always easier to keep quiet and let everyone keep up their little charade that everything was fine. But now with Adamant's disappearance, that was no longer possible. The façade had been broken. Nothing would ever be the same.

Riptide knew she wouldn't like what she was about to hear, but she needed to know. In Gallows's words, she deserved to know the truth.

"We actually had six members of the team before you showed up," Gallows began. "There was Rena, Adamant, and I of course, but there were three others you never knew. Their names were Blot, Ceylon, and Daisy. They were all curious Pokémon that joined us for their own reasons, but all of them were welcomed all the same. They were good teammates, always working diligently despite any shortcomings they had. Especially Ceylon. Even though that poor Bulbasaur couldn't rid himself of the delusion that he'll always be weak and useless to the world, he still did his best.

"Then one day, years ago, Blot took a mission to Whispering Abyss without telling anyone but Ceylon. He intended to take the mission alone, but Ceylon followed after him. Shortly after that, Daisy followed suit. For a long time, no one else dared to go after them. Rena decided it was best we waited for them to return. She knew that we would never see those three again, but she still insisted. She didn't want to lose herself to Whispering Abyss for reasons she would never willingly divulge. Adamant and I stayed here with her, if only because we didn't want to leave her all alone. Adamant and Rena learned to cope, mostly by not discussing our lost members.

"That was, until you came along, Riptide. You came along and you reminded Adamant of the teammates we will never see again. He realized that you are replacing our teammates. That realization broke his will to stay here. Now he's undoubtedly inside of Whispering Abyss as we speak, seeking to rejoin those that we lost."

Riptide was speechless. She hadn't expected any of that. It was true that she knew something wasn't right with the team and a certain melancholy aura lingered around them, but she hadn't expected that they were all grieving. Worse yet, not just grieving, but also holding onto a futile hope that their teammates would return before too much time had passed. Before Rena, Adamant, and Gallows met their ends, as all mortals must.

"None of this is your fault, rest assured," Gallows then said. "You simply picked the wrong team to join. Someone else eventually would have come along and caused Adamant to run away as well. It was only a matter of time."

"But it was still because I'm here that he left..." Riptide said mournfully. "He left because I joined your team..."

Gallows said nothing. Riptide sighed dejectedly as she turned to leave the Lampent be. She opened the door and expected him to call after her, but he didn't. He only hovered in place, watching her silently. She stared at him and gave him a moment to say anything, something, if he desired so. But the ghost remained silent. He could offer her nothing to lighten her mood. He needed her to dwell in the sad truth of Team Skystreaker.

Riptide frowned as she left the room and headed down the hall. She didn't know where she was going. She wasn't hungry for breakfast and she sure wasn't interested in picking out a mission. She had a feeling Rena wouldn't be coming back soon at any time, so there was no point in selecting a posting anyway. So she wandered the guild aimlessly, ignoring all of the Pokémon passing her by and wallowing deep in her unpleasant thoughts.

She couldn't leave the guild, she knew that much. She was getting better at living this life and she didn't want to go back home. She couldn't, not after everything that had happened. She had to stay here where she had some semblance of happiness. She knew she could switch teams, of course. That much was easy to do and happened quite often from what she heard. Plenty of teams were

filled with members that couldn't stand one another and while though sometimes they learned to tolerate one another, other times it only resulted in arguments or physical violence. The easiest solution for that was for one of the members to join another team. Which one left and which one stayed was always a debate in itself, but it was always the solution to these problems.

Riptide couldn't do that either, unfortunately. Maybe she was too afraid of joining another team. Maybe she worried that Pokémon on these new teams wouldn't like her or consider her a deadweight. Maybe she had committed too much time to Team Skystreaker to leave. Maybe it was a bit of all three of these reasons. Whatever it was, she couldn't see herself leaving Rena and Gallows, even after everything she had learned.

She was stuck with them.

She buried her face in her claws, trying to ignore the growing headache building in her troubled mind.

Rena did eventually return, though it was well into the evening. Riptide was sitting in her bed, reading through a book, when the bird flew back in through the window. Her eyes were no longer red, but there was no shine in her eyes. She resembled a corpse reanimated through unnatural means.

Riptide remained motionless as she waited for the Altaria to say something. However, Rena paid her no mind. She only flew up to her perch and buried her head into her back feathers. She instantly fell asleep. Riptide kept staring, waiting to see if anything would happen, but nothing did. Rena stayed fast asleep. The Wartortle sighed. She had hoped that Rena would have returned much earlier so that they could still go on a mission. She had been spending all day preparing for the mission by purchasing a new bag from the market and replenishing their supplies. However, it seemed that her efforts had been for naught. Rena was in no mood for anything.

The Wartortle closed her book and got up. She cast the bird one last stare before heading out the door and making her way to the bulletin board. Only an Umbreon and Gengar stood before it, pointing at various missions. That wasn't surprising, considering both of those species were usually nocturnal. She imagined a good number of teams were filled with only nocturnal Pokemon so they could take on the night missions.

She waited for the duo to leave, then approached the board herself. A few missions were leftovers from earlier that morning, all of which would undoubtedly be picked up the next dawn. However, the vast majority of the board's postings were indeed night missions. One asked for a team to get rid of a thief who would raid their store during the dark hours in Whitestone Town. Another asked for simple protection from malicious ghosts that would harass someone's home in Cheri Village. Yet another asked for someone to hunt five Stantler since they usually came out after dusk and bring them back to the client in Steel Town.

So these were the missions Gallows took. She wondered which ones he might have selected when he did them all by himself. Perhaps he took the ones where he apprehended thieves in the night. That could easily be a one Pokémon job and he seemed quite formidable.

"Oh, hello there, Riptide," came a voice from behind.

The Wartortle swiftly turned around to find a familiar Lampent hovering before her. She resisted the urge to tuck her head into her shell.

"H-Hi Gallows," she greeted awkwardly. "I was just... I wanted to see what missions they had since we never did one today."

"I suspected as much," Gallows said impassively. "I'm afraid that Rena will be like this for some time. She cared very deeply for Adamant."

"So... no more missions?" the Wartortle asked with drooped ears.

"None with Rena at least," Gallows confirmed. "However, I'll still be taking my usual night missions. We should still make enough money to keep our room and sustain ourselves. You're free to do as you please. You can consider this an extended vacation if you want."

The Lampent then swooped toward the board and read through each of the listings. Now Riptide really started to question if she should stay with Team Skystreaker. If the team leader wasn't taking jobs anymore and would only sulk, then it wasn't really a team anymore. Only Gallows seemed to be pulling his own weight... or, hovering his own weight. Whatever he was doing.

"Gallows... is Rena going to get better?" she then asked.

"That's something I'm working on," Gallows answered without looking back. "There's only one way to mend Rena's broken heart and it'll take some time for her to agree with what must be done. She will resist and she will fight it with all her might... but she'll realize what she needs to do soon enough."

"And wh-what's that?" Riptide wondered.

"That she needs to join the others in Whispering Abyss," Gallows said grimly. "That she cannot stay here any longer if she wants to feel any semblance of happiness again."

Riptide didn't know what to say. It was such a ghastly solution to Rena's problem. Gallows wanted her to abandon everything she held dear and welcome the abyss that swallowed each and every one of her teammates. Riptide wanted to say it was a cruel fate the Lampent wished upon his leader, but she knew that wasn't it. Despite how demented his wishes were, all Gallows really wanted was to end Rena's suffering.

The Lampent pulled a listing off the board and drifted toward the acceptance booth. She watched him go and briefly debated her options.

"Hey Gallows," she called to him.

The ghost stopped. He turned back to her, paper still wrapped up in his clutches. With a swell of bravado in her chest, she stepped toward him.

"I don't know how long it'll take you to help Rena," she said, "but I'd like to go night missions with you until you do figure something out. I don't like doing nothing. It makes me... it makes me depressed."

And though he couldn't smile, Riptide still knew how much joy that brought him. She saw how vigorously his soul-flame crackled within his glassy body. She suspected he had been very lonely for a long time. Why he purposely chose to stay away from his team when he was consumed with loneliness was something Riptide couldn't understand, but maybe something was bothering him. Maybe he had been hiding something from Adamant and Rena.

She had a feeling that whether she liked it or not, she would soon discover what that something was.

Whispering Abyss B2F

Blot had finally tired of walking everywhere and had settled himself on Daisy's shoulder. He had worried that she would insist he stay on the ground, but she didn't mind one bit. So he stood atop her as Ceylon took the front. The little Bulbasaur had never taken the lead before, but he didn't seem the least bit daunted. He marched forward with a big smile across his face, his heart overflowing with pride.

"So this is what being the leader feels like," Ceylon said pleasantly. "It feels nice deciding where to go instead of just following everyone."

"Just remember that because you're the leader, you're also in charge of keeping us safe," Daisy stated. "You're going to see any danger ahead of us first, so you need to let us know right away."

"Yeah, I gotcha," Ceylon said with a nod. "I won't let anything happen."

"Good," Daisy grinned. "Then we'll be in good hands."

Ceylon beamed at her before continuing returning his attention back to what lay ahead. Blot stared up at the unchanging, sunless sky. He wondered how much time had passed in the outside world now. Perhaps it had been a year now. After all, they had cleared the first floor relatively quickly and with any luck, the second floor would be the same. He hoped that Rena and the others were coping well with the loss of their teammates. He never thought the team to be tight-knit, but maybe that was just him. He had always kept to himself and never interacted much with the group. For all he knew, everyone was the best of friends and shared their deepest, darkest secrets with one another without a moment's hesitation.

"He's a lot happier, I can tell," Daisy suddenly said in a hushed voice.

"Hmm?" Blot asked as he turned to her. "I did not hear you."

"Ceylon, he's happy," Daisy said again, keeping her voice low so the Bulbasaur wouldn't hear them. "Like honestly happy, not just pretending to be."

"Was he not always this way before?" Blot asked, also lowering his voice. "He always smiled when I saw him."

"He was, but he didn't mean it," Daisy corrected. "Sometimes those smiles were genuine, but most of the time, he was faking it. You can really see the difference if you look at him right now."

Blot glanced at Ceylon again. Now that he really looked at the Bulbasaur, his smile did seem different than before. His eyes shined and one could actually see his fangs. He had always kept his mouth closed when he smiled before.

"You are right," Blot realized. "I wonder why he seems more cheerful."

"Probably because he feels more confident," Daisy laughed. "He would have never taken the lead otherwise, trust me. Lots of little Pokémon feel intimidated being in the front or back, so they always stay in the middle."

"I cannot say I blame them," Blot stated. "Now let us hope that a Pidgeot does not come along and gobble Ceylon up. We would really regret making him the leader then."

The three continued through the dungeon, following Ceylon's lead as he led them out of their current corridor and into a spacious room devoid of any enemies. Three new corridors greeted them from each side of the chamber. Ceylon stopped and stared at each one with a thoughtful gaze.

"Hmmm... I think we should take that one," Ceylon said as he pointed to the corridor right of them.

"Fine by me," Daisy said with a shrug.

Everyone followed Ceylon into the new hallway, leaving behind the room and entering the unknown. Blot glanced up each of the cliff walls surrounding the team while Daisy kept a close ear out for enemies approaching from behind. Neither of them saw or heard anything suspicious.

Ceylon stopped. Daisy nearly stepped on him, but quickly stopped herself. The Bulbasaur sprouted his vines as he crouched low to the ground. From within the darkness, Blot could hear something coming toward them. Something that seemed to be dragging something heavy, a tail maybe.

Blot leapt into the air and flapped in place, ready to strike. Whatever was coming toward them stood no chance against the three of them. It would be obliterated within seconds.

The dungeon apparition emerged from the darkness. The moment it revealed itself, Ceylon immediately dropped his vines.

It was Adamant.

The moment the Vaporeon saw the trio, he leapt at them with the vigor of an eager child. He put a paw around Ceylon's neck and nuzzled him dearly before pouncing at Daisy and burying his forehead into her stomach. The Granbull laughed giddily as she swiftly picked up the Vaporeon and trapped him in a tight hug. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she squeezed him tight, nearly suffocating him. However, Adamant didn't struggle. He welcomed her embrace, tail wagging softly.

"Adamant!" Ceylon cheered. "You came down here!"

"I did," he choked out from Daisy's grip. "I missed all of you."

"Oh I didn't realize that you liked us that much," Daisy teased. "I always thought you stayed on this team because of Rena."

"I thought the same," Adamant said with a little smile. "But your departure did hurt. It kept eating at me and eating at me until I couldn't take it anymore."

Blot softly landed before the rejoicing group. He saw Ceylon and Daisy smother Adamant in nuzzles. And he saw how Adamant took it all in, smiling and laughing in a way Blot had never seen before. Adamant was happy to be with his team, despite everything.

But the touching sight did nothing to wipe away the thousand needles now driving themselves into Blot's heart.

He had now condemned another teammate of his to the wretched dungeon. Once again he had robbed someone of their life because he hadn't taken precautions when entering Whispering Abyss.

Blot snapped his beak and let out a sharp caw. The celebrating group stopped and looked toward him with confused glances. The bird glowered at the Vaporeon as he aggressively ruffled his feathers.

"You should not have come here, Adamant," Blot hissed.

"What?" Adamant asked, tilting his head.

"Go back," Blot told him harshly. "I see that bag along your neck. I know you packed an Escape Orb. Use it and leave this place. Take Daisy and Ceylon with you while you are at it."

The Vaporeon was too stunned for words.

"Blot, don't be like that," Ceylon begged. "He came here because he cares about you. Same with me and Daisy."

"You should not have," Blot said coldly. "You threw away your lives coming after me. Do none of you have any value in your lives? Were your lives worth abandoning for the sake of a Corvisquire you have hardly interacted with?"

"I know you were always quiet and I didn't always have the best opinion of you, but I still liked you," Daisy said. "I mean... we're teammates. Teammates stick together, no matter what happened. Of course I had to come after you."

"You only came here because your life has no value," Blot shot back. "The moment Cackle died, you stopped living. You couldn't care less about what happens to yourself."

Daisy was so appalled by his slander that all she could do was shirk away. Ceylon frowned mournfully as he carefully approached the bird, but Blot swiftly raised his wings and let out a hiss. That got the Bulbasaur to back off immediately.

"I should never have told you where I was going," Blot spat at Ceylon. "Look at the mess you have caused. You have doomed over half of the team to this wretched dungeon and left the others stranded in a miserable life where we no longer exist."

Ceylon's eyes filled with tears. Blot felt a pang of guilt at the sight, but he didn't give in. He stepped up to the Bulbasaur and ripped the team bag off his neck before awkwardly putting it around his own.

"Make the right choice," Blot told them. "Go home and forget about me. I am not worth anything."

He then took off, flying far away from the team. He didn't look back as he soared through the corridors and rooms effortlessly.

He prayed his team went home.

Chapter 7

Three years had passed since Blot disappeared into Whispering Abyss. Riptide was still taking night missions with Gallows. Rena was still in a depressive stupor. Nothing had changed and Riptide felt nothing would change any time soon.

She couldn't say she hated being nocturnal now. She found that most Pokémon weren't awake in the night, allowing her peace and quiet. It felt good to roam the streets and the guild without chatter filling her ears or being surrounded by hordes of guild members. Granted, the more dangerous Pokémon roamed the night, but she was always prepared, especially whenever Gallows was around. It helped that he had evolved into a Chandelure now, thanks to a Dusk Stone they received as a reward for a mission. Most predators took one look at the ominous ghost and ran the other way.

The two decided they would take the night off that day. They had been working hard and deserved a break as the world slept around them. Gallows took Riptide to a mountaintop east of the guild, one that sat beneath a clear sky so would could see all the stars of the night and still remained shrouded in comforting darkness. He said he liked to come here in his youth to stargaze, to marvel in the vastness of the infinite universe mortals could never hope to comprehend.

Riptide sat on a rock as he hovered beside her, the both of them taking in the night sky. A cool breeze swept past them, light rustling the grass by Riptide's feet.

"I have to say... this is nice," Riptide said with a smile. "I see why you came here so often."

"It also served as a nice place to get away from everyone," Gallows replied. "Not many Pokémon visit here, for whatever reason."

"Maybe because you have to fly to get up here," Riptide said smugly. "The mountain's too steep to climb."

"Maybe," Gallows chuckled.

She gazed into the stars, trying to find any constellations she recognized. She spotted the Eon constellations immediately, a series of stars resembling Latias and Latios holding hands. That one was always easiest to find, considering how bright their stars shined compared to all the others. Now it was time to see if she could find the Jirachi constellation. That one was always trickiest due to the distance between three of the stars.

"You've grown a lot since you've joined our team," Gallows said suddenly. "You don't stutter anymore."

"I guess I don't," Riptide said with a shrug. "I'm happier here, so maybe that's it."

"I imagine you weren't too happy before you joined?" Gallows asked.

Riptide paused. She had never told anyone about her life before the guild. She had always kept it secret from all of Team Skystreaker, just because it never felt important to bring up. Besides, she was moving on from it, so there was no reason to think about it anymore.

She almost didn't want to say anything, but she had grown fond of Gallows. Ever since Adamant left, Rena had become increasingly more difficult to talk to. She'd disappear for days at a time, and whenever she did come back, she never had anything to say. She barely acknowledged that Gallows had evolved. Riptide only had Gallows for company.

She decided that yes, she could answer his question. They were teammates after all and friends. It was okay to divulge her secrets to him.

"My parents weren't that great," Riptide said quietly. "Especially not my Father. He was this big Charizard who had great aspirations in life. He wanted to join this dragon army made up of the most elite in the region who made it their life mission to find legendaries and battle them. He always fantasized about locking talons with a Moltres as they plummeted at high speeds. He probably would have achieved that dream too... except he met my mother at a play in a chance encounter. I... was the result of their encounter. An accident."

Riptide sighed as she hugged her tail close to her chest.

"Mother coerced him to help take care of me," Riptide went on. "After all, he was half the reason I existed. So instead of flying through the skies and living large, he had to live in a little cottage in a little town in the middle of nowhere. Mother always had to go on trips because she became part of a guild team to could support us. She took a lot of those Mystery Dungeon missions too, so she'd be gone for weeks or months at a time. Personally I think she was trying to avoid taking care of me... so Father had to care for me in her place. He... wasn't happy about that.

"I... I had to do everything for him. I had to make the meals, do the shopping, keep the cottage tidy, everything. It wasn't so bad at first since I could avoid him at school and be with my friends... but eventually he took me out of school. Right after I learned how to read and write, he said I had learned everything I really needed in life. He said I had actually learned more than I deserved to know, that accidents didn't even deserve any semblance of an education. My only purpose was to take care of him. It was my punishment for daring to exist.

"And it was very easy to make him upset. If I... If I said the wrong thing or didn't make dinner the way he wanted it, he'd roar in my face and tell me what a stupid mistake I was and how he wi... wished he had smashed my egg beneath his foot. What... what broke me was what happened about a year ago. I tripped while bringing him dinner one day and spilled it all over his tail flame.... and he was so angry

that he threw me into the wilderness for the night. I couldn't find my way home and all I could do was wander around uselessly, p-p-praying that the Mightyena I heard howling in the distance were just my imagination... I only survived because a kind Haunter heard me crying under a tree and helped me find my way home.

"I knew I had to leave at that point, but I didn't know what to do. Father was an intimidating Pokémon and there was not a single soul around that would dare defy him. Even as a Wartortle, I stood no chance against him. So I stayed with him and tried not to upset him. He thankfully never threw me out again, but he still wasn't nice to me. I started thinking maybe I deserved this as divine retribution for being a mistake and burdening my parent. But one day, while I was in town, I heard about a guild that offered living quarters to their members. It was on the other side of the region in Cinder Town, but it always had teams looking for new members.

"As soon as I got word of that... I went back home and took care of Father the rest of the day as I usually did. Then when he fell asleep, I slipped out the door... and never came back home. And that's how I ended up at your guild, in your team's room, hoping to be accepted."

She looked to Gallows, expecting to see him casting her a pitiful gaze and tell her how sorry he was that she had lived through these circumstances. However, his gaze remained solemn and his soul-flame crackled softly and gently.

"I'm surprised your parents haven't found you yet, considering you disappeared," Gallows said simply.

"Maybe it's just proof that they really didn't care about me at all," Riptide said dejectedly. "After all, I was never supposed to exist. I'm just an accident. Their lives would have been better without me."

Gallows started laughing then. Riptide shot him a befuddled look, not understanding what could possibly be hilarious. He shook his head as he looked to the Wartortle with a strange glimmer in his eyes.

"Ah Riptide, no one is supposed to exist," he told her. "We are all accidents, cosmic coincidences in a vast and indifferent universe constantly expanding in every which direction."

"Huh?" she gawked.

The Chandelure swooped toward the night sky and outstretched his tendrils to the stars above.

"So many Pokémon are convinced that our lives have meaning, that we are all here because we have a specific purpose to fulfill," Gallows said. "But alas Riptide, that is merely a lie mortals conjured up to shirk away from the awful truth no one wants to hear; that there is no reason to exist. Our existence is merely the product of a cosmic accident that could have gone any other way."

"I thought... we were all created by Arceus," Riptide said quietly. "That's what I always heard."

"Hah! Ah yes, that's what everyone says, either that or it's Mew," Gallows laughed crudely. "That claim isn't entirely untrue, but he doesn't care about us. You see Riptide... he doesn't know you exist. All of existence in its indifferent and cold glory... is an unending dream of Arceus. We are all the fabrications of his mind, playing within his dream without ever realizing the truth. He didn't mean to bring us into existence, and yet here we are, dwelling within him. We are all an accident. Why else would he never show whenever the world is in danger? Simple: because none of this is real. World-ending scenarios are nothing more than nightmares that end as quickly as they started. It's the same reason Mystery Dungeons exist despite defying every conceivable law of nature."

"I... I don't know if I believe that," Riptide replied. "That sounds... a bit hard to swallow."

"You don't have to," Gallows said with a dismissive shrug. "I've tried to tell many Pokémon this over the years, but they deny it as well. I suppose no one wants to admit their life has no purpose and can

end immediately if Arceus ever awakens. They all stubbornly believe that life has meaning and that there is someone who will always be there to protect them if the world goes awry. I almost envy that blissfully ignorant delusion they've given themselves."

Gallows drew closer to the Wartortle and wrapped her claws in his ghostly appendages. His touch felt awfully warm for a ghost. Then again, he was a fire-type, so maybe it shouldn't have been surprising.

"Regardless of whether you believe me or not, know that it's your parents' fault that they're miserable, not yours," Gallows told her. "Lots of Pokémon become miserable when the universe no longer works in their favor. Instead of accepting that the universe never truly cared for them in the first place and using that to their advantage to make the most of life, they latch onto something they can blame. They find something to give them power again, to give them the illusion that the universe cares for them again, and they grow bitter and spiteful. You, unfortunately, were the target of that blame. But you are not the reason for their misery."

His words touched Riptide. They were nihilistic and she couldn't quite get behind the idea that their lives were nothing more than fabrications of a dream... but she took comfort in knowing that her father's cruelty wasn't her fault. She squeezed his tendrils tighter as she smiled, warmth spreading through her being.

The Chandelure pulled his tendrils free as he went back to stargazing. Riptide had a strange longing to reach for him again, but resisted. She only joined him, spotting more constellations and pointing them out to the ghost as she found them. Gallows joined her, and quite eagerly too.

When the two had found every constellation known, including ones Gallows had invented, the two basked in the silent comfort of the night. They gazed up into the sky, taking in the vastness of the universe and its infinite beauty. Riptide hoped they'd spot a shooting star, if only to make the night all the more special.

"... Thank you for your company this past year," Gallows suddenly said. "I miss this, I truly do."

"Oh, you're welcome," Riptide said awkwardly, taken aback by the sudden declaration. "You're nice to be around."

She expected his soul-flame to flare delightfully, but it only shrank as his eyes fell. He made a long sighing sound that echoed from within his domed body.

"Blot's disappearance changed everyone," Gallows said ruefully. "You wouldn't know this because you weren't there, but Team Skystreaker was quite close-knit. Adamant, Rena, and I of course all got along wonderfully, but we enjoyed the company of the others too. Blot, for as quiet as he was, proved capable and his deadpan mood always provided its own source of entertainment. Daisy, while loud and brash, always kept me going even in the grimmest of situations. Then of course Ceylon, though he had only been with us for three months, endeared me with his naivety, like mistaking rawst for cheri berries or something of the sort.

"When they disappeared, the team was never the same. They pretended nothing was the matter, but I could easily see through their flimsy facades. I only had to peer into their dreams to see the nightmares and the heartbreak plaguing their lives. Sometimes I didn't even need to do that. It hurt to see such hollow shells of their former selves."

"Is that why you turned nocturnal and wouldn't talk to them anymore?" Riptide asked.

"Unfortunately," Gallows replied. "My teammates... they're the only reason I find happiness in this dream of an existence. One day, I will perish just as everyone else, or Arceus will awaken and I'll cease to be within an instant. My teammates are my purpose, the only things I can cling to in this universe. They are figments of a dream just as I am... but they are the figments I cherish above all us. Their happiness is all that matters to me. I could watch the whole world

burn, but if my teammates were well and standing by my side, I would be happy. To see them as they are now hurts more than you can ever imagine."

"I think I understand a little," Riptide said tenderly. "You have me though. Do I make you feel better?"

"Yes," the Chandelure admitted with a small glimmer in his eyes. "I'll admit I've felt much happier since I've taken missions with you. Of course I know my heart won't truly mend itself until Rena reunites with the others."

"Someday she will, it just might take a while like you said," Riptide said. "Until that day comes though, I'll always be around. I'll follow you anywhere if that makes you happy."

Now Gallows's flames flared brightly and beautifully. He didn't even need to say anything for Riptide to know exactly how he felt. She could feel it deep within her own heart, burning with the might of a thousand suns.

Whispering Abyss B2

Blot had put quite a distance between his teammates now. It certainly helped that he could fly on swift wings while they were forced to travel on their slower feet. Being a bird was almost an unfair advantage in a Mystery Dungeon; he could easily zip through the whole dungeon without needing to fight a single enemy. His teammates had claimed they wanted to help him by joining him in the dungeon crawl, but they had only been slowing him down.

He would search the rest of this floor for the Mareep. He doubted the child would be this close to the surface, but he had to check, just in case. There were always cases where the client was on the second floor.

He dearly hoped that his teammates had gone home now. They didn't need to be in this dungeon with him. They didn't need to abandon the world as they knew it for him. They thought they'd only be gone for a few years, but they underestimated Whispering Abyss. One didn't enter Whispering Abyss, go five levels deep, and expect to return within a decade. All of his teammates deserved better than the cruel fate the dungeon had in store for all who dared to enter.

"Oh Blotty, you're all alone again," came a voice.

Blot nearly fell from the sky at the sudden sound. He looked to his side to find the Duskull flying beside him, keeping up with him with relative ease.

"Where are you friends, Blotty Blotty?" she asked in that unsettlingly child-like voice.

"I told them to go home," Blot answered plainly. "They do not belong here."

"Awwwwww, but Blotty, I liked them!" she said with a gleeful giggle. "The more Pokémon, the merrier! Oh I sure do love lots and lots of company."

"They cannot see you," Blot stated. "They would never interact with you."

"Well of course they can't see me, I know that," she said with a wave of her tatters. "You're the only one here who can. But it's still fun to have lots of Pokémon around! I have so much fun when there's so many Pokémon around. You and Blitzzy aren't enough to keep me happy!"

"Why can only I see you?" Blot then asked. "What are you?"

He almost didn't want to ask the question, but it nagged him, especially now that he didn't have the company of his teammates. He had a sinking feeling that he'd see the Duskull more often now that

he was alone. If he had to encounter her more frequently, he at least wanted to know exactly what she was.

"Why that's a silly question!" the Duskull laughed. "I'm exactly what I look like!"

"Then why can no one else see you?" Blot asked gravely. "Normal Duskull cannot be invisible to all but one Pokémon."

"Oh, so that's what I look like to you," she said curiously. "Oh no wonder why you didn't start screaming the moment you saw me! Most Pokémon that see me end up clawing their eyes out. They can't handle what I look like. Ooooooh, I do wish you could see me for what I really am... but I guess we wouldn't be having this conversation if you could! Poor little Blotty would probably drive himself into the cliffside and snap his neck."

Blot had no idea what to say to that. He desperately tried not to dwell on the implications of her words.

"Well at least I don't look like a Sableye," the Duskull went on, oblivious to Blot's turmoil. "Those are silly little creatures. And I do suppose a Duskull *issssss* fitting for a form..."

Again, Blot remained silent. He looked away from the Duskull as he flew from room to room, searching for a flash of yellow. Surprisingly, even though he passed over several dungeon apparitions, none of them gave him any mind. They clearly saw him, but not a single one leapt up to rip him from the skies. It was almost like they no longer cared for him.

"Oh, still looking for Blitzzy are you?" the Duskull realized. "Oh Blotty, why must I tell you again that it's pointless? He's mine now. It's what he wants."

"He does not belong here," Blot stated. "He is coming home."

"I wouldn't be too sure about *thaaaaaaat*," the Duskull said tauntingly. "He's pretty far down, Blotty. By the time you get find him... oh, it just might not be worth rescuing him. I thought you'd know this better than anyone, Blotty."

"I do not know what you are talking about," Blot said dismissively.

"Oh I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," she said snidely. "I know you and how you think, Blotty. You and I go way back, Blotty. You don't remember me?"

Shivers went down Blot's back. A horrible thought went through his mind, a thought he desperately shoved far away. Yet the thought persisted and returned twice as strong, twice as insidious.

He knew exactly what this Duskull was: it was the voice of the dungeon.

For just a second, he saw the Duskull for what it truly was. In that brief instance, his sanity dropped the illusion and allowed him to see what actually flew beside him. He saw the single eye that would gain more pupils with every blink. He saw the worms emerging from the pupils. And he saw the gaping abyss that was the mouth, its bottomless black depths beckoning to him.

He blinked, and mercifully the creature was a Duskull once more. He flapped his wings harder to speed away from her, but she caught up with him easily.

"I really did miss you, you know," the Duskull said wistfully. "Oh I was so sad when you left, Blotty. I know a lot of Pokémon don't stay here very long, but oh I was hoping that you'd be an exception. I just get so lonely here. No one ever wants to visit for very long, if all. So many thousands of years I've been here, hoping for a little friend, but they all leave or get taken away. Or they die, which is always the biggest disappointment. Especially if they look at me. I don't understand why they have to die, it's never fair.

"Like there was this nice Indeedee that stayed for a while. He was a cute little guy who lived in this big old castle. He stumbled in here one day say... oh, three hundred years ago. He got lost here you see, came in here on a mission like so many others, but he lost all of his supplies. I fed him of course, I couldn't let him starve here, and I made sure no one bothered him. But oh, he still wanted to leave. And wouldn't you know it, someone left an Escape Orb lying around a few floors down. Oh I really didn't want him to leave, but he took that orb and left all the same.

"I was really hoping you'd stay, Blotty. Oh yes, you looked so sad when you came here all those years ago. You even went to my heart! No one else has even gone there. I took it as a sign that you wanted to make this place home. I was ready to make you a nice little home, but then you left! Oh Blotty, why did you leave?"

Blot needed to get away from her. From *it*. He kept flapping and flapping, desperately picking up speed, but he could not shake the Duskull off. She sighed sadly as she shook her head.

"Maybe you got cold feet," she decided. "Maybe you weren't ready. Oh, you really did break my heart, Blotty. I was so upset and when that Mareep came here, oh I just had to drag him all the way to my heart so no one could take him away. He's not as fun as you, but at least he doesn't want to leave."

The Corvisquire's heart thudded painfully in his chest. He could hear his blood pumping in his ears. No, no the Mareep couldn't be at the bottom. He couldn't. He had considered this could happen to the Mareep, especially since the Mareep was nowhere to be found on the first floor, but he had hoped otherwise.

He entered a new room and immediately spotted the stairs. He swooped down, but just before he could reach the stairs, the Duskull blocked his way. He swiftly outstretched his wings and forced himself to a stop mid-air. She giggled softly as she put her tatters behind her back.

"Ah Blotty, you're still going after Blitzzy, aren't you?" she asked.
"Even after everything I've said?"

"I am," he told her, feebly hiding his growing dread.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she told him. "I've been real nice to you since you showed up Blotty because you're very special to me. But if you keep going... oh I'm going to stop being so nice. I really don't want you taking my little Mareep away."

Blot hesitated. He thought there was something off about the dungeon. It was true that the first few floors of a dungeon were always the easiest, but this dungeon had been too easy. Aside from the Grimmsnarl, it had been easy enough to dispatch enemies and even then, there had been relatively few. Most of the time, there would be a dungeon apparition every five minutes. He and his team had only encountered maybe five enemies total their entire venture through the dungeon. The of course there were the enemies that saw him, but seemed to pay him no mind...

From here on out the dungeon would actively work against him. It would fight with him every step of the way and if what the Duskull said was true, he would struggle until he reached the bottom. He would have to give the dungeon his all for another few dozen floors.

And though he wanted to take out his Escape Orb and leave behind this wretched dungeon, he knew he couldn't. He had committed to this. This was his dungeon, his burden. He landed before the Duskull, his gaze unwavering.

"I am bringing him home," he said firmly.

The Duskull sighed dejectedly as she moved aside and stretched out a tatter toward the stairs.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Blotty," she told him eerily.

The Corvisquire gave her a glance, then headed down the stairs. He felt her eye watching his back as he slowly descended to the next floor. Her dreadful, all-seeing eye from behind the illusion his mind conjured up.

He prayed she was lying about the Mareep residing at the bottom of the abyss.

Four and a half years had passed since Blot disappeared into Whispering Abyss. Rena still hadn't left her depressive stupor. So just as always, Riptide went about life while she waited for Gallows to work his magic and snap Rena out of her daze. She had repeatedly asked the ghost if there was anything she could do to help, but he always assured her he was fine. All he asked of her was companionship, which Riptide happily provided. She quite liked the Chandelure. She didn't know if it was because she found his warmth comforting as a reptilian Pokémon, but she enjoyed being around him. He was odd, yes, but also kind in his own strange way. That was typical for ghosts, honestly. They were strange, impish creatures, but they usually meant well and would always lend a paw in time's need. Riptide didn't know why most Pokémon didn't understand that and thought them to be selfish pranksters.

The two now ate breakfast in the mess hall. They had returned from their night mission to find that the cafeteria had just opened for the day. Riptide's stomach had been rumbling for the past hour and the line wasn't terribly long, so the two didn't hesitate to enjoy a good meal before bed. At least, Riptide did. Gallows simply hovered beside her as she dug into a plate of a dozen raw Wishiwashi. Personally she had hoped for some Wrumple, but considering that there actually were Wrumple members of the guild, it might have made many Pokémon uncomfortable. The only reason they dared serve fish was because it would offend no one. Most fish Pokémon couldn't join land guilds, so they would never see their own kind being served on a platter.

"You're not going to get anything?" Riptide asked as she swallowed her sixth fish.

"Oh, I've already told you, I don't eat physical matter like the rest of types," Gallows said smugly. "I couldn't even if I wanted to."

"Then what exactly do you eat?" she asked. "You can't tell me you survive off nothing. At the very least your soul-flame has to eat."

"How very perceptive of you," Gallows laughed. "Ah, very well. I'll show you, if only because I actually do need sustenance right now."

Riptide was going to ask if he meant "tell" not "show", but quickly found the answer for herself. The Chandelure ensnared the Warturtle before dragging her closer to him. He pressed her gently against his face as his soul-flame flared giddily. Riptide squirmed as her heart fluttered in her chest, but that seemed to be the reaction Gallows wanted. He laughed and laughed as Riptide's panic escalated.

Then a lull came over her as Gallows's flames flared and eagerly billowed. Riptide's panic slowly subsided as she fell deeper and deeper into this calm, her mind slowing down. She limply leaned against the Chandelure, no longer fighting him. He felt rather nice, actually. She loved the soft crackle of his soul-flame so close to her ears and the warm smoothness of his glassy form. It was so strangely soothing.

"Delicious," Gallows cooed. "Ah, who knew just how delightful you would taste?"

The Chandelure released the Warturtle, instantly snapping her out of the daze. She pulled herself out of his grasp as she ran her claws over her shell, making sure she still existed and that he hadn't sucked out her soul.

"Wh-What did you do?" she asked.

"Oh, I savored a good amount of your spirit," Gallows answered simply. "I didn't eat all of it of course, but I still enjoyed quite a bit of it. Has anyone ever told you that you have a certain spiciness to your soul? I certainly wasn't expecting that flavor from you, but it's quite delectable, I must say!"

"No... because no one else ever tried to eat me before," Riptide said, her cheeks flushed red. "I hope you didn't ruin me..."

"Oh no, trust me, you'll be fine," Gallows said with a dismissive wave of a tendril. "I've enjoyed several Pokémon's souls, many of them in this very guild! All of them are perfectly well-adjusted as they can be."

Riptide didn't know if she could believe him. He had just admitted he was *eating her soul*, after all. Maybe she'd start losing feeling in her legs later. Or maybe she'd wake up the next morning and suddenly find herself floating outside of her body, unable to get back in.

Gallows quickly picked up on Riptide's turmoil and wrapped a tendril around her shoulders. This time however, his hold was comforting. He gave her a gentle gaze as his flames shrank.

"Oh Riptide, you know I would never do anything that could hurt you in any way," he said softly. "You're much too precious to me."

Riptide smiled sheepishly at the remark. Gallows's flames returned to their normal size as he eyed her deviously and drew her closer.

"Of course, maybe it's not such a bad idea to devour your whole soul," he said evily. "It would only take an instant. I could always have you inside of me, your soul burning eternally in my flames. I would never have to be without you... oh yes, that's such a wonderful thought."

Riptide laughed as she pushed away the Chandelure, but he kept her close, teasingly keeping his hold around her. He nuzzled her, making exaggerated humming noises as he lapped at her soul.

"Stop, stop!" she cried playfully. "That tickles!"

"Oh, but now I'm afraid I can't," Gallows taunted. "Your soul is mine now. We have to be together forever."

"Wicky! Wicky, please!" she pleaded.

"Oh that's real cute, you've even got a little nickname for him," said a new voice.

Riptide and Gallows stopped. The two turned to find that they now had an onlooker standing before them, a Toxtricity grinning at both of them. She recognized him as one of the members of Team Venture, a team that Team Skystreaker used to share a bedroom wall with. Riptide had seen him from time to time, but had never learned his name.

Riptide hastily shoved the Chandelure away as she covered her face with her claws, too flustered to look the creature in the eye. She hoped he hadn't seen too much of their playful antics.

But most of all, she was mortified that the Toxtricity had heard Gallows's hatchling name. Now the poison-type knew it too. Gallows hated the name and had only told her his old name out of closeness. Unfortunately she happened to find the name to be very cute and couldn't resist calling him by it sometimes. She only hoped the Toxtricity wouldn't use the name and terrorize Gallows with it.

"I never thought you'd find yourself a mate," the Toxtricity said snidely to the Chandelure. "You never came across as the romantic type to me."

"She's not my mate," Gallows said flatly. "She's my teammate."

"Yeah, sure she is," the Toxtricity sneered. "You sure are pretty fond of her with the way you keep touching her. I've never seen you do that with the rest of your teammates. I know love when I see it."

"That's quite rich coming from you, Indigo, considering you can't keep a consistent mate for more than a month at a time," Gallows stated haughtily as his flames crackled sinisterly. "How many love failures have you had now, six I believe?"

Indigo frowned hard, but didn't make a rebuttal. Gallows's eyes gleamed deviously as he basked in Indigo's befuddlement. Riptide was too flustered to say anything herself.

"Have anything else you'd like to antagonize us with?" Gallows asked a little too eagerly.

"Actually I came here to tell you something about your leader," Indigo said, his glower now replaced with a contemplative frown. "Rena, right? Altaria?"

"Yes, that's her," Gallows confirmed. "If you're here to tell me she hasn't been doing many missions and she disappears for days at a time, that's nothing new. She's been doing that for some time."

"Well I found out where she's been going whenever she disappears," Indigo said. "Thought I'd let you know since I get the feeling she isn't telling you guys."

"No, she's always been rather secretive no matter how much I ask," Gallows replied dismissively even though his flames burned vigorously at the mention of the Altaria. "You've seen her though?"

"Yeah, many times actually," Indigo said with a nod. "I thought it was a coincidence at first, but then I saw her a second time at the same place. I ended up watching the place just to see what would happen, and sure enough, she kept coming back maybe once a week."

"Alright, where is she then?" Gallows asked.

"The entrance of Midnight Woods," Indigo answered gravely.

Any smugness in Gallows's expression vanished. His eyes glazed over as he seemed to stare through the Toxtricity. Riptide, immediately sensing something was wrong, lowered her claws and gently shook the Chandelure.

"Gallows?" she called softly.

Light returned to his eyes. Though he appeared composed, Riptide saw the way his soul-flame flickered. It flickered and trembled nervously, as though an invisible gale were threatening to blow it out.

"I see," Gallows said simply, his voice betraying no emotion. "So she's there."

"You should tell her to stop hanging around there so much," Indigo warned. "Eventually someone is going to see her and realize she's not doing her job and tell the Guildmaster. He just might kick her out if she's doing nothing."

"I certainly hope that someone isn't you," Gallows said with a cold, haunting stare. "You might find your soul burning in baleful flames for all eternity if you do... Oh I've always wondered if you would make a delightful sizzling sound when you burn..."

"Nah, I'm not going to tell anyone," Indigo chuckled, unfazed by Gallows's threat. "Your team has had enough misfortune already. The last thing I want to do is make it even smaller."

Gallows kept his cold stare on the Toxtricity, saying nothing. Indigo took that as a sign to get going, doing so without saying another word. Riptide looked to the Chandelure to find him staring off into the distance, contemplating deep in Indigo's words.

"I know that name," Riptide said quietly. "Isn't Midnight Woods a Mystery Dungeon near Clover Town?"

"It is," Gallows answered hazily, still lost in thought.

"Why is Rena visiting it then?" Riptide asked. "That's pretty far away..."

The Chandelure's flames billowed before he brought his gaze to the Warturtle. There was something strange and dangerous glimmering in his eyes, something that made Riptide afraid. She held her tail close to her chest as she scooted away from the ghost.

"Because her son is in there," Gallows answered.

"Huh?" she gawked. "What... Rena has a son? I don't... she never said anything about that."

"Oh she does, but only Adamant knows about that. And me I suppose, though not by her choice," Gallows said. "She actually adopted a child before she ever joined the guild, a little Starly boy. His parents could no longer care for him and she took the little one in. She loved that little boy, let me tell you. She pampered him every moment of the day. They were quite the happy family together, at least that's what her dreams always show. Unfortunately, she barely had the child for two years before he wandered into Midnight Woods with some friends and as of now, has yet to return. "

"Oh..." Riptide said, folding her ears back.

So that was why Rena refused to go into Whispering Abyss even though most of her team had; she was waiting for her son to return. The time dilation was making it so he'd be gone for years instead of a few hours. It all made sense now. Except...

"But... the time dilation in Midnight Woods isn't that bad from what I've heard," she started to say. "I... I used to live in Clover Town myself and nobody ever really worried about the dungeon. I've heard you're only gone for a few weeks at most."

"That's correct," Gallows said.

"So then... her son and his friends should have gotten out of the dungeon pretty quickly," Riptide stated. "There's no reason they should still be missing."

Gallows eyed her, eyes glinting eerily. Riptide ran her claws through her soft tail as she grimaced.

"Why... why are they still missing?" Riptide asked timidly.

"Because they died, of course," Gallows said plainly.

"What?! But... But! No one dies in Mystery Dungeons!" she cried. "If the enemies get you, you just faint and then you wake up outside of the dungeon, or someone comes to rescue you if you can't get out. Nothing there can kill you!"

"True, the denizens of the dungeon can't kill you, but the same can't be said about outlaws using a dungeon as a hideout," Gallows then said.

Riptide's heart shattered. She had heard of this from her mother sometimes. Occasionally Pokémon went into dungeons for an exploration and they'd run into a criminal using the dungeon as a sanctuary. After all, it was a great place to stay until enough time passed where the authorities would forget about them. Sometimes these criminals ran away in terror when stumbled upon, lacking the bravado to fight back. Sometimes their fear turned into aggression, and they'd lash out at the intruders. Usually the Pokémon ended up with a few injuries and that was it. But other times...

"No one knows what truly happened to those children," Gallows then said. "However, it's the conclusion I've come to. Especially because there were reports of a dangerous Noivern prone to violence around the town during that time.

"Of course, Rena still thinks her son is alive. No matter what anyone tells her, she insists that he'll return one day. He's simply spending a long time in the dungeon, she says. He'll come back, she says. Even

when she went down into the dungeon and couldn't find him, she still believed he was simply hiding. She probably would have stayed near that dungeon every day of her life if Adamant didn't come into her life and insist they join a guild together."

Riptide was at a loss. She had no idea what to say to any of this. This was all too much for her. She knew she wasn't supposed to know any of this. It was personal information Rena had a right to keep to herself. Yet here was Gallows, feeding her everything there was to know.

Gallows drew closer to the Warturtle, an unsettling glint now shining in his eyes.

"I'm afraid if Rena is returning to Midnight Woods now, I can no longer convince her of anything through words alone," Gallows then said. "Riptide..."

He leaned closer, too close. His face pressed against the Warturtle's, making it so she could only see the whiteness of his eyes. The crackling of his flames filled her ears as he stared deep into her, boring into her very soul.

"... you and I are going to have to do something drastic."

Chapter 8

"I... I really don't think this is a good idea."

"It's all we can do at this point. Rena won't listen otherwise."

Riptide grimaced as Gallows carried her through the skies. Immediately after their conversation in the mess hall, the Chandelure had told the Warturtle they were going to visit Rena after they got a good morning's rest. They were going straight to Midnight Woods so they could speak with the Altaria face-to-face. Except Gallows didn't exactly intend to "speak" with Rena.

"You can't just... just drag her to Whispering Abyss against her will," Riptide pleaded. "It's not right..."

"I'll tell you what's not right; letting this suffering continue even though there's such an obvious solution to it all," Gallows scoffed. "I gave Rena plenty of time to act on her own. I gave her more time than I should have. Now I'm out of patience."

Riptide knew where Gallows was coming from. She knew just how much he cared for Rena. In his mind, the members of Team Skystreaker were his only source of happiness. If anything were to happen to them, his world would turn hollow. He only wanted to end Rena's suffering and finally reunite everyone in the team.

But Riptide couldn't agree with him. The thought of knocking the Altaria unconscious and dragging her body to Whispering Abyss made her feel sick. Maybe she should have anticipated Gallows could be this way. After all, he admitted to spying on unsuspecting Pokémon's dreams. No matter how he justified that, saying it was to better understand those around him, she never felt comfortable at the thought. Dreams were private and deeply personal, the source of someone's insecurities and darkest thoughts. They were never meant to be viewed by outsiders.

Maybe that was why she always waited for Gallows to fall asleep before she followed suit; maybe she wanted to make sure he was actually sleeping so he wouldn't spy on her own dreams. Maybe it wasn't just because it was harder to sleep with the sunlight in her eyes.

"Can't you just talk to her?" Riptide offered. "Maybe she'd listen if you tell her how badly you want to see your teammates again..."

"She wouldn't listen," Gallows said pointedly. "She never listened in the beginning and she certainly won't listen now that she's waiting for her dead son again."

"Then maybe you can tell her the truth about her son...?" Riptide offered again and just as weakly. "She... She might come with you if you could make her realize what really happened..."

"Ahhhhh I wish," Gallows laughed bitterly. "Sadly that won't happen. Adamant has been trying for years and nothing's come of it. She most definitely won't listen to me if that's so. I'm just the impish ghost that joined her team out of sheer loneliness."

Riptide was running out of things to say. Of course Gallows wouldn't be easily swayed; he was just as stubborn as Rena, if not more. Talking him out of this diabolic plan would be downright impossible. Still, she had to try *something* .

"If you really go through with this and drag Rena to the dungeon..." Riptide started to say. "I'll... I'll leave you."

That got Gallows's attention. His soul-flame trembled. He lost his grip on Riptide as he unwillingly became intangible. He caught Riptide before she could scream, but didn't hesitate to swoop toward the ground and set the Warturtle down. After taking a moment to calm himself, he shot the Warturtle a dark glare.

"You wouldn't," Gallows said.

"I would," she told him. "You force Rena into Whispering Abyss and I'll... I'll disappear. Forever. You'll never see me again."

"You like me too much to do that," Gallows stated. "You would have nowhere to go if you left."

"I could say the same about you," Riptide shot back.

That got another reaction out of him, this one in the form of a bewildered stare. It was quick and he just as quickly hid his shock behind a mask of indifference, but Riptide saw it. It was enough to give her the courage to push harder.

"You always say that your friends are your only reason to live," Riptide went on. "You couldn't care less about the world. That's why you want them all in Whispering Abyss even though you'd leave this world behind."

"I won't deny that's true," Gallows said simply. "I've tried for a long time to find something worthwhile in this world, but nothing truly matters except for my teammates."

"But no one else except you thinks that," she then said. "Especially not Rena. She's not going to leave because her son is her world. He's everything to her."

"She's living in a delusion," Gallows said bitterly. "She thinks it's the only way she can cope with his death."

"Maybe she's living in a delusion, but so are you," Riptide countered. "Didn't you tell me that everything in this world is fake? What does that make your teammates then? What does that make me?"

She grasped his tendrils in her claws and gave them a good squeeze.

"If this is all a dream, then what you're feeling right now isn't real," she said. "You're just forcing yourself to feel something to find some

semblance of happiness. If you really believe that nothing is real... then our friendship is just a lie you're telling yourself. You'd be no better than Rena."

Gallows grew silent. He left his tendril limp in Riptide's grasp, unable to do anything more than stare into her eyes.

"Now you know how Rena feels," she said softly. "She just wants to be happy. Even if she has to lie to herself... she'll do what she can to be happy."

Riptide sighed deeply as she gingerly stroked Gallows's ghostly appendage with her claws.

"I don't want to leave you," she said softly. "I... I love you too much, but I can't let you force Rena to abandon her life. I can't let you take her happiness away just so you can be happy. It's wrong."

"So what, you expect me to let her stay here?" Gallows asked, a hiss seeping into his voice. "You expect me to let her live in misery away from her teammates? She might miss her son, but she also misses the others."

"I'm sure she does," Riptide admitted. "But we can't force her into the dungeon. That'll only make her hate you."

"Maybe it's a price I'm willing to pay, if she'll finally stop being miserable," Gallows muttered distastefully.

"I don't think you want that," Riptide replied. "Maybe you think you do... but your soul-flame says otherwise. It was shaking when you said that."

Gallows glanced at the flames along his tendrils to find that they were indeed trembling. He hastily withdrew himself from the Warturtle's grasp and turned away.

"So then you're suggesting that we just let her stay in this world then while the others traverse the dungeon," Gallows said bitterly. "You suggest I go down into the dungeon myself and forget about Rena."

Riptide frowned glumly. She didn't want to answer the question. She didn't have the heart to say it aloud. It would break Gallows's spirit. She had already hurt him enough today.

Gallows's flames flickered strangely. She eyed him as he stared at the ground, deep in contemplation. After a silent, uneasy moment, he looked back at her.

"So then that's it," he said flatly. "You have nothing more to say."

Riptide bowed her head to nod.

"Of course not," Gallows spat. "Then I suppose that only leaves me with two options, in which I have to leave someone behind in both cases. Pah. Maybe I should be glad I can only live for a hundred years max; at least I don't have to live with heartbreak for centuries."

Just then, an idea came to Riptide. She paused as the idea unfolded itself within her mind, growing with each passing moment. She looked back up at the Chandelure with a small frown. The Chandelure noticed her sudden change and simmered down. He drew closer to her, curiously stopping before her and waiting for her to speak.

"I... I think I actually know what we can do to help Rena," she said.

"Do you now?" Gallows asked.

"Yeah... if it works, she'd come with you to Whispering Abyss," Riptide said carefully. "She'd do it willingly too."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Gallows said with a dry chuckle. "Rena will never leave so long as she thinks there's a possibility her son will return. You're aware of that, right?"

"Yeah... and I know just what to do about it," Riptide said.

Midnight Woods Entrance

Rena stood upon a branch overlooking the Mystery Dungeon. In the afternoon sun it seemed perfectly peaceful and not at all like a dungeon. Aspen trees filled the forest with their pleasantly bone-white bark and soft yellow leaves that trembled rhythmically in the wind. If not for it being a dungeon, it would be a wonderful place for an outing or a picnic.

Her son couldn't resist giving the dungeon a stare whenever the two passed it by on the way home. He said he loved how the tips of the trees would stretch far into the sky and how soft the bark felt against his beak and claws. He always told her that when he was older, he'd make a nest using the aspen branches. Rena would laugh at that, telling him it was better to make a nest out of grass and furs, but he would insist that aspen was the best nest material.

The Altaria sighed wistfully. She missed that Starly. She sincerely hoped that he would come home soon. She had been waiting for so long. Now her teammates were disappearing into Whispering Abyss one by one. She knew she needed to join them, but she couldn't. Not until Hunter came home. He needed his mother to be there for him. He had no one else in the world to care for him. Her teammates could at least take care of each other.

She mulled in this before hearing footsteps nearby. She turned to find a familiar Chandelure and Wartortle coming her way. She found his presence quite the surprise, but didn't have the energy to react. She had been feeling very tired as of late. She couldn't even remember the last time she sang her morning song just because she had so little energy.

She watched in silence as the two stopped before the tree she perched herself in. They both gave her a long stare, neither of their

eyes betraying their feelings. Rena stayed high above him, returning their stares with a blank one.

"Hello Rena," Gallows said, his voice cordial. "So this is where you've been."

"Sometimes," Rena said flatly. "I wonder how you found me."

"Indigo told us he kept seeing you here," Gallows answered. "After he told us, we didn't hesitate to come after you."

"Must have been quite a journey," Rena said indifferently. "It takes a day to come here by flight."

"It certainly was," Gallows said simply.

Rena had a feeling about why her teammates were before her. She knew she could easily fly away from the scene, but Gallows would follow her. He would chase her day and night until she collapsed from exhaustion. He was relentless that way. It was best then to get this over with.

"And why are you here?" she said, flatly feigning ignorance.

Much to her surprise, Gallows wasn't the one to answer her. Riptide stepped forward, gaze forlorn but determined. It was quite the contrast from the bashfulness Rena was used to seeing.

"Rena, I know you're here because you're waiting for your son to come back," Riptide began. "I know that's why you won't go to Whispering Abyss even though Gallows wants you to."

"How do you know about my son?" Rena asked, unable to stop herself from gawking. "I never told you... I... I never told anyone except Adamant..."

"Gallows told me," Riptide answered solemnly. "There's a lot he knows, actually, and not exactly for the best reasons."

Rena shot the Chandelure a disbelieving stare, but he only shrugged in response. She couldn't believe this. How did he know about Hunter? Did Adamant say anything to Gallows over the years? The two never seemed to share personal details with one another, but maybe it had slipped out of Adamant one day.

She felt betrayed. No one was supposed to know about Hunter except Adamant. No one was supposed to know of the heart break that greeted her every morning. That was private, that was personal.

"I know I shouldn't talk about your son," Riptide went on before the betrayal could truly sink in. "Especially when it's not my place to know about him. But... I want to help you Rena. I know that even though you're here waiting for him, you do want to be with your teammates. You miss them just as much as you miss your son."

"Yes... I do," Rena admitted quietly. "I do want to reunite with Blot and Ceylon and Daisy and Adamant... but I can't. Hunter... he's coming back, I just know it. I don't have the heart to go into Whispering Abyss knowing that I might be gone for at least a hundred years. Hunter might come back while I'm gone and no one would be there for him."

Gallows was about to say something, but Riptide cast him a quick glance, silencing him instantly. The Wartortle looked back at the Altaria with a soft smile and ears folded back.

"What if... I were to stay here and wait for Hunter in your place while you be with your teammates?" Riptide offered.

Rena was taken aback. She waited a moment to see if the Wartortle would take back her words or realize the implications of her offer, but Riptide remained steadfast in her conviction.

"If you do that, there's a chance you'll die before I come back from Whispering Abyss," Rena said. "You'll never see Gallows again if you wait for Hunter."

"Actually, I won't," Riptide said with a knowing smile. "I already told you when we first met... Wartortle live for a very long time. I'm pretty sure I'd still be alive by the time you two come back."

"But that's just a myth... Wartortle don't actually live ten thousand years," Rena insisted.

"It's an exaggerated truth," Riptide smirked. "We don't live ten thousand years, but we can live a good two thousand. Something about our bodies let us last longer than most other Pokémon."

Rena didn't know if she could believe that. She had always thought the long lifespans of Wartortle was a fairy tale, just like how supposedly all Cubone wear the skulls of their mothers. Everyone knew Ninetales were the longest lived Pokémon, able to reach a thousand years. Yet here was Riptide proclaiming she could live twice that amount...

"I know it's hard to believe, so I won't force you to," Riptide then said. "But I really do want to stay here and wait for your son, if it means you can be at peace in Whispering Abyss."

"And what will you do if he returns?" Rena then asked.

"I'll take care of him," Riptide answered. "I'll be his new mother. And if I can't do the job well enough, I'll find someone to help me. But I won't abandon him if he does come back."

"I don't know..." Rena said anxiously, digging her talons into the bark of her perch. "It's not that I don't trust you to take care of him, but... I don't know if I can go through with this. Hunter's still my son and I'd still feel like I'm abandoning him even if I entrusted him to you..."

"Oh Rena..." Gallows started to say.

He swooped up to her before Riptide could stop him. He hovered before the Altaria, gazing into her eyes with a strange look. He

almost seemed livid, except she felt no anger radiating from his being.

"I know you care about Hunter more than anyone else in this entire world," Gallows spoke. "You took him in when he had nowhere to go. You raised him and loved him without care that his egg wasn't laid by you. Though I could say a number of things right now about how you are dealing with his disappearance... I'll instead say that there's another child that needs you right now in Whispering Abyss."

"You mean the Mareep Blot went after," Rena realized.

"Yes," Gallows said with a nod. "His parents might be dead by the time we rescue him. If that's the case... he will need someone else to look after him."

"Raising a Mareep, oh that would be something," Rena laughed hollowly. "At least Hunter was a bird like me..."

"I can't think of a better Pokémon more suited for the job than you," Gallows replied. "I think you'd be a wonderful mother to him, regardless of your differences."

Rena averted her gaze, unable to speak more. But Gallows drew closer, so close that she could feel the heat from his flames.

"Come with me, Rena," Gallows said solemnly. "You can trust Riptide to look after Hunter if he returns. Above all us... please come with me for that Mareep's sake."

She glanced down at Riptide to find her also casting her that same soft stare Gallows was giving her. She then looked back to Midnight Woods and watched the yellow leaves quake before a breeze flowing through the dungeon. How much she wished she could take in this pleasant sight with Hunter again. What she would give to have him beside her on that branch.

But she remembered her teammates and how they too were trapped in a dungeon just like Hunter. They too missed Rena terribly and longed for her company. Was it truly right to choose Hunter over them when they had spent so much time together? Especially when Hunter still hadn't come back after all these years?

"... you're right," Rena said after a while. "I do miss Hunter quite dearly... but I do have a team that misses me just as much. There's also a poor little boy stuck inside that dungeon that needs saving. That poor Mareep will need someone to look after him after we rescue him. I suppose it's time I stop waiting for Hunter and save someone else's child. It's... it's what Hunter would have wanted."

Tears fell from her eyes. She covered her eyes with her wings as the sorrow consumed her. Gallows gently lifted her off the branch and set her on the ground. Riptide reached out and held her in a close embrace as Gallows hovered nearby.

It hurt to finally leave Hunter behind. Even if Riptide would still be there for him, Rena wanted to be the one to welcome him back. She was his mother after all, the one that had raised him when no one else could. But she knew she couldn't wait anymore. Her teammates needed her. It was her obligation as team leader to always be there for them.

So she wept and she wept as she finally mourned for the loss of her son, knowing she would never see him again.

After Rena had cried all her tears and grieved, Gallows and Riptide took her back to the guild. After resting a day, the three then packed supplies for Whispering Abyss. Riptide made sure to purchase anything they didn't need at the market and helped organize it to maximum efficiency. By the time she was done, the bag was filled to the brim with several orans, multiple orbs, a variety of seeds, and many apples.

With that done, the three then headed for the fateful dungeon. They told no one of their departure, knowing that Pokémon would try to talk them out of it. They only left in silence, pretending they were going on a mission as they always would.

Within a few hours, the team arrived at Whispering Abyss. It beckoned to them, urging them to step into the maw that was its entrance. The white haze around the dungeon seemed thicker today and wafted around them vigorously, almost as though it were alive.

Riptide shuddered at the sight of the ghastly dungeon. So this was the place Adamant had disappeared into. This was the place the rest of Team Skystreaker now traversed through. This was the wretched dungeon the world feared. This was the place that would steal everything you know and then spit you out years later.

Though she knew it was just an anomaly of reality, Riptide thought she felt a presence while standing before the dungeon. She thought she felt something watching her with unsettling zeal. Something that wanted her. Something that wanted all of them and every Pokémon it could ever get its dark and ghastly tendrils around.

"This is it," Rena then said, snapping Riptide out of her dreadful thoughts. "This is... Whispering Abyss."

"That's right," Gallows said with a nod as he secured the bag around his being. "Are you ready, Rena?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Rena said with a dejected sigh.

The Altaria turned toward the Wartortle. Riptide straightened up as the bird cast her a soft but desperate gaze.

"Promise me you'll take care of Hunter if he does come back," Rena begged. "Promise me... you'll be the best mother that you can to him."

"I promise," Riptide assured with a smile. "When you come back, I'll have a lot of happy memories to share with you. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Rena gave her a short nod, and then looked back to the dungeon. Riptide knew Rena was still struggling with entrusting Hunter to the Warturtle, but at least she was making an effort. If she didn't actually trust Riptide, Rena would have never left Midnight Woods.

Gallows hovered closer to the Warturtle. She could see the bittersweetness in his eyes. If he actually had a mouth, he'd be giving her a sad smile. The Chandelure reached forward and wrapped both of Riptide's claws in his tendrils, holding them tenderly.

"You know, I had been hoping that you could come with me into Whispering Abyss," he admitted. "However... it seems that's no longer possible."

"I'm afraid not," Riptide said with a half-smile. "I have to stay here and wait for Rena's son."

"So you do," Gallows said wistfully. "So you do."

"I'll still be here when you come back though," Riptide assured. "I'm not going anywhere. When you leave Whispering Abyss, I'll still be here. I'll be waiting for you in Clover Town. Hopefully my parents don't find me and do anything crazy to me... but I doubt it since they still haven't tried to find me after all this time."

"You're an adult anyway, you're in charge of your own life now," Gallows said.

The Chandelure's flames flickered softly as he released her claws and held her face in his tendrils. He looked into her eyes tenderly as he gently ran the end of his appendage over her cheek.

"I'll miss you, Riptide," he told her.

"I'll miss you too, Wicky," she said back.

Gallows chuckled at the mention of his old name. He drew closer and nuzzled the top of her head, sharing his warmth with her one last time before withdrawing. He gave her one last meaningful gaze, then made his way over to Rena.

"Time to go," he told her. "Let's see the others again."

The two shared a reaffirming nod, then flew toward the dungeon's entrance. Within moments, the two had disappeared into the abyss's darkness. Riptide sighed deeply as she gave the dungeon one last stare, then turned around and went on her way to fulfill her promise for Rena.

She would miss her team, she really would. She could already feel her heart longing for their return. Part of her wanted to do nothing more than follow both of them into Whispering Abyss. It would be so simple, so easy. And yet she couldn't. She had made a promise. Besides, she would see them again. Their parting wouldn't last forever.

Though it would be many years until the day finally came, she looked forward to seeing not only Gallows, Rena, and Adamant again, but the other team members she never knew.

Chapter 9

Whispering Abyss B3F

The Duskull made well on her promise about no longer taking it easy on Blot. The moment he descended to the third floor, five dungeon apparitions swarmed him. They had taken on the forms of frenzied Electrike and didn't hesitate to shoot him out of the sky. Thankfully, Blot's wings proved faster than their bolts and he fled from the room without a single one of his feathers singed.

He left behind the ravenous beasts as he flew down a corridor, the Electrike's baying and howling growing farther and farther away. Yet even as the distance between them grew, he knew he wasn't safe. He could feel the other apparitions watching him from within the darkness, their beady eyes locked onto his every move. They were only waiting for a command from the dungeon to pounce upon the bird and drag him into the black void of unconsciousness. Or perhaps they'd take him to the very bottom of the dungeon to join with the Mareep.

Blot still couldn't fathom the child actually residing in the heart of the dungeon. He knew it was a possibility that the Mareep could be so deep into the dungeon. Even though it was more likely that the Mareep was on one of the first few floors, it was always a possibility. That was why Blot knew only he could go into the dungeon and couldn't take anyone else with him. He didn't have the heart to let the dungeon steal literal centuries away from his fellow teammates. Only he would accept that terrible fate.

Even still, he had hoped that wouldn't be the case. He didn't want to emerge into a new era if he could help it. He already felt he didn't belong in this one.

He entered the next room to find another horde of enemies waiting for him. Multiple Nidoran, Growlithe, and Gible watched the

Corvisquire emerge from the corridor before charging at him. Their efforts would have been futile, considering they were all land-dwelling, but they were accompanied by a Swellow, the swiftest of all birds. That Swellow didn't hesitate to dive-bomb Blot at blinding speeds and drive him into the ground. The moment he slammed into the dirt, the other Pokémon pounced at him.

He felt their claws and teeth, the dozen sharp points digging into his flesh and rending him apart with every scratch and bite. He squawked and flapped his wings violently as he pecked at their paws, but for every Pokémon that withdrew, another soon replaced it. Their attacks proved relentless and merciless. He couldn't even reach inside his bag to pull out an orb. A simple Paralysis orb would turn the tides so easily, if he could only reach it.

A blast of water suddenly knocked away a good chunk of the Pokémon, sending them crashing into a nearby wall. Multiple vines wrapped around the Corvisquire and yanked him away from the remaining Pokémon. They dragged him along the ground as more pillars of water doused the hostile ones. A few stragglers escaped from the oncoming attacks and pursued the Corvisquire, refusing to let him get away. Blot flapped his wings and struggled to break free from his binds, but it turned out he didn't need to do anything. A familiar Granbull rushed the remaining enemies and rammed her foot into their tiny bodies. Her attacks were so strong and so forceful that the Pokémon went careening into the distance with a single kick.

Within moments, not a single dungeon apparition was left standing. The vines holding Blot finally released him as their master approached him. The bird ruffled his feathers as he stared into the Bulbasaur's eyes with a disapproving glower.

"I told you to go home," Blot said dryly.

"That's not a very nice thing to say to someone who just saved you," Ceylon grumbled. "If we had shown up any later, you would have been done for."

Blot clacked his beak distastefully as Adamant and Daisy returned from their onslaught. The both of them were also frowning at the bird, but in a more disheartened way. The two looked like they had something to say, but were unable to word it. Blot disregarded them as he dug into his bag and pulled out a much needed oran. He took a good bite out of it, relishing the healing juices as they trickled down his throat.

"I suppose none of you have any intentions of returning back to the outside world," Blot said disapprovingly.

"We don't want to leave you here," Daisy answered. "It feels wrong to forget about you."

"It doesn't sit well with me to wait for you to come back without truly knowing exactly when you'd return," Adamant added. "I also suspect that you aren't going to be gone for just a few years based on the way you're acting... you wouldn't be so adamant about doing this mission by yourself if you'd truly only be gone for a few years."

"So then you instead choose to follow me while knowing you'd never return to your old life," Blot said plainly.

"Yeah, I am," Adamant said with a nod. "It's better than waiting for you. You don't understand how much it hurt when I glanced at your beds every night and found them empty. I'd rather be with you three in a new world than stay behind and mourn for your absence."

"No you would not," Blot snapped. "Do not talk as though you understand what you are saying."

"Well I agree with Adamant," Ceylon piped up. "There's no reason to stay back at the guild when you're down here. We're teammates after all, we stick together."

Blot cawed loudly and flared his wings. The raging inferno in his chest compelled him to step toward the trio. He snapped his beak harshly as his thoughts reeled in terrible, volatile circles.

"You talk as though you understand what it feels like to leave behind your world," Blot said bitterly. "You know nothing. None of you do. You do not understand what happens to a Pokémon when they leave an era behind and enter a new one unexpectedly. You do not understand how lost you feel, how different everything is. No one will understand the way of life you had before and find it strange instead. You do not understand how lonely you will feel when everyone you used to know has been long dead and no one remembers their names. You do not understand how you do not belong in this new world and never will."

Something glimmered in the little Bulbasaur's eyes. He looked up to the fuming bird with a pitiful gaze. He hesitated for a moment.

"Blot... this isn't the first time you've been in Whispering Abyss, is it?" he asked softly.

"... No," Blot conceded. "No it has not. The first time was eight hundred years ago."

The trio was taken aback by this unexpected information. Blot's heart calmed as he breathed a deep sigh and shook his tail, loosening a few stray feathers. He supposed it was time to come out with the truth. Maybe if they knew what had happened all those years ago, they'd finally understand why they couldn't stay in Whispering Abyss.

"I'm not from this time era," Blot began. "I belong to the era of eight hundred years ago, when coin was Poké and children left school at the age of five and their parents a year after. Humans still lived in faraway lands and many Pokémon would make trips to these lands to gather knowledge to benefit our own cultures. Guilds were a relatively new concept and only five existed on the whole continent. Markets sold oddities, not essentials. A Pokémon was expected to hunt and find his own food in the wilderness. To capture and civilize a wild was unheard of.

"That strange era was the one I hatched into. I would say I was happy but I was not. I could not find a flock where I felt I belonged.

The towns I visited made no efforts to accommodate ones born with wings instead of paws. My parents still loved me but I could not feel their love. They felt distant to me. It was not long before I felt I did not belong anywhere.

"So at the age of eleven, I abandoned my world and entered Whispering Abyss. Back then even we understood the dangers of the dungeons and to best avoid them. But I did not. I wanted to emerge into a new era. I wanted to find myself in a new world where I would feel I belonged. So on that day I willingly entered. For every floor I descended, years passed in the outside world. I let the years trickle by as I went deeper into the dungeon until I reached the very bottom.

"When I returned to the outside world, I saw the change. Eight hundred years had passed. Buildings with structures I had never seen before were now commonplace. Families of mixed species were frequent. An odd system called a postal service now existed. It was all too much to take in. Even now after many years I am not fully accustomed to the strangeness of your era. But did I find the happiness I wanted?"

He waited to see if his teammates would offer him an answer, but they kept the reverence of the situation.

"I did not," he went on. "I now felt only more isolated and unfit for this era. However, now I was in a world where I had no loved ones or any sense of familiarity. No amount of adjustment could ever make me feel I belonged to this world. Every day I always see the changes and am reminded that I should not be here, that my choice was a mistake.

"There is only one thing that keeps these awful thoughts at bay and stopping them from dragging me into despair: promising to never allow this to happen to someone else. I know that there are other Pokémon out there that must feel the same way I did all those years ago. I know that they are tempted to fling themselves into Whispering Abyss to find solace in a new world. So I made it my

purpose to stop these Pokémon from making that regretful decision. I joined the guild closest to Whispering Abyss and spend every day reading through the requests, searching for the missions that would require us to save an unfortunate soul from the abyss. That has been my life ever since and will be until the end of my days."

Blot looked upon his teammates, studying their reactions. Adamant was staring forlornly at him, Daisy had averted her gaze and now looked at her feet, and Ceylon looked as though his heart had broken into two. Good, they understood the situation now. They understood why he was here and why they couldn't follow him.

"I would not be able to forgive myself if I condemned all of you to my fate," Blot told them. "That is why I ask you leave me be and return home. I have nothing to return to. I have not for a long time."

"But you are leaving something behind..." Ceylon said weakly. "You're leaving behind your whole team. Doesn't that make you a little sad?"

"Somewhat, but that was why I refused to grow too attached to any of you," Blot admitted. "I always knew this day would come. Especially because I have a dreadful feeling that the Mareep is at the bottom of the dungeon. If this feeling is true I will not return to the outside world for another eight hundred years."

The Bulbasaur frowned glumly before taking a step forward. He looked into the Corvisquire's blank eyes, his own eyes brimming with deep misery and longing.

"I get where you're coming from, I really do," Ceylon said in a soft voice Blot could barely hear. "I actually joined our team because I didn't feel I belonged anywhere either. I thought maybe a guild could help me figure something out and make me stronger. So, I get why you made all of the choices you have. But I can't leave you behind, Blot. It's not right. I might lose everything if I come with you... but you shouldn't have to come back to a lonely world. You're not just my teammate; you're my friend."

Blot was taken aback by his declaration. He didn't even have time to say anything before Daisy brought her gaze back to the bird. Her eyes were filled with firm, unwavering dedication.

"I'm coming with you too, no matter what you say," she proclaimed. "I'll admit it, when I lost Cackle, I lost my reason to live. I didn't know why I was even alive anymore. After joining Rena's team though, I realized I had a new reason to live; looking after all of you guys. Keeping you guys safe from little vermin like the ones here. So if you're going any deeper into Whispering Abyss and throwing your life away... I'm coming with you. Someone's gotta protect you from all of the nasty Pokémon that live here."

"And I'm afraid I'll have to follow you as well," Adamant then spoke. "Team Skystreaker is the center of my universe. It's all I have as an Eevee that's not the least bit happy with his evolution. I'm not letting you leave me behind, especially when you've taken half of the team with you. If you're going to the bottom of Whispering Abyss, then I'll be doing the same."

Blot was at a loss for words. Here he had thought his teammates had finally understood why they couldn't come with him. He had told them everything and yet they still persisted in coming with him. They would willingly leave behind this world and follow him into a new one. He couldn't believe any of them.

And yet, he couldn't help but feel touched. All these Pokémon cared about him. All of them would follow him no matter where he went, all because they loved him. Because their teammates were their life now. The world had given each of them far more grievances and pain than their hearts could take, so of course they clung to their only remaining sense of happiness.

Blot realized he was no different. Though he had kept his distance from his teammates all the years he had known them, he had cherished their company. They felt like the flock he had always wanted. They worked together and with that unity, accomplished great things none could do alone. Above all else, they had accepted

him as their teammate without hesitation, without ever pressuring him to open himself up to them.

The bird beamed softly at his three companions as their heartwarmth spread to him.

"You are right, we are all a team. We are always there for each other," Blot said warmly. "If you three truly wish to come with me, I will stop you no longer. We can all reach the bottom of Whispering Abyss together if you so desire."

They didn't even need to say anything for Blot to know what they'd do. Their smiles said it all.

Whispering Abyss B5F

Though traversing through the dungeon took longer thanks to his teammates' slow feet, their company proved invaluable. With their combined might, they could easily fend off the endless barrage of enemies coming their way. Daisy especially was most useful, usually putting an end to Pokémon with a quick kick. It certainly helped that the Pokémon were shorter than her, if only for now. Later in the dungeon she'd probably have to put in more effort.

When the four arrived at the fifth floor, they decided to take a small break. Everyone's muscles were growing a bit sore from all the walking and flying, and their bellies were beginning to rumble. The group settled into a corner of the room they found themselves in and opened up their bags. Blot worried that they'd go through the food supply too quickly with the four of them, but thankfully, Adamant had packed a good amount of supplies in his own bag. Not only had he packed a number of fruits for the team to enjoy, but he had packed a good amount of orbs, including a second Escape Orb should the one in Daisy's bag ever be lost. The four sighed contently as they ate fruit in peace, all the while keeping an ear out for oncoming Pokémon that would dare attack them in their time of rest.

"So you're telling me we've got a new teammate huh?" Daisy asked after taking a large bite out of her apple.

"Yes, she's a Warturtle by the name of Riptide," Adamant said. "She's quite the shy girl, let me tell you. Hardly speaks unless you ask her a question. I almost feel sorry for her."

"Ah, she's probably just nervous since she's new," Daisy shrugged. "Remember how Ceylon here would always shake whenever he talked to us? It's the same thing. Newbie nervousness."

"Hey! I never did that!" Ceylon cried. "I was always smiling and cheerful, even when you guys were all mopey and sad."

"Nah, I remember you were always shaking like a little leaf whenever you talked," Daisy assured with a chuckle. "I always thought your bulb was going to burst open from all that movement."

"Did not..." Ceylon muttered distastefully. "Well except maybe around Gallows. You know, because he's a big living fireball... and a weirdo."

"Well either way, I'm looking forward to meeting Riptide," Daisy said with a big grin. "I hear Warturtle live a long time, so she'll probably still be alive by the time we come back. That's assuming she's not already ancient."

"She's not, she doesn't carry herself like the elderly Ninetales do," Adamant assured. "If I had to guess, she's probably no older than fifteen."

"Oh, pretty young then," Daisy said with a nod. "Yeah she'll definitely be around when we get back."

"And I bet she won't be as shy when we see her," Ceylon laughed. "I just hope she likes me..."

"You're a lovable guy, I don't see how she couldn't possibly like you," Daisy smiled as she caressed the Bulbasaur's forehead.

Ceylon crooned softly as Adamant and Daisy laughed. Blot would have smiled if he could. The three seemed so happy together. It was no wonder why they were so willing to follow each other down into this horrid dungeon. Though Blot himself didn't say much during the conversation, he still felt pleasant warmth when around them. Their cheer and camaraderie rubbed off on him and made him want to chirp.

"Do you think Gallows and Rena will be okay though?" Ceylon then asked.

The cheerful mood turned melancholy as Adamant's ears drooped. He frowned sadly as he took a bite out of a grepa berry.

"Don't know," Adamant confessed. "Part of me hopes that they'll just come down here with us. I know Gallows wants to, but I'm not so sure he can convince Rena."

"She really doesn't want to come here, does she?" Ceylon asked glumly.

"She has... someone she cares deeply about in the outside world," Adamant said after a moment of deliberation. "She doesn't want to leave him if she can help it."

"Oh, is it family?" Ceylon asked gently.

"Basically," Adamant replied vaguely.

"Do you think she'd still be around when we come back?" Daisy wondered. "She is part dragon, after all. I've heard dragons live for a long time."

"They can, though for no more than three hundred years," Adamant acknowledged. "However, Rena isn't exactly a dragon. She's just a

bird that has some draconic abilities. She told me her kind only live a good seventy years or so."

"I see," Daisy said simply.

The four mulled in the loss of their remaining teammates. It would be nice to think that the two would still be alive when they returned, but they knew it wouldn't happen. Neither of their kind were known to live past a hundred. Only Riptide had any hope of still being alive, if she even stayed at the guild.

"I'll miss them," Ceylon said solemnly. "Rena took good care of me and made me feel loved on this team. Even Gallows, for as weird as he was, was nice to be around. Nothing was ever boring with him."

"It is unfortunate they did not come with us," Blot said. "We all could have been together and not have to mourn for our losses."

"Hopefully they'll be okay," Daisy said with a sigh. "Well, as okay as they could be with most of their team gone."

"Oh I'm sure they'll be just fine, don't worry," said someone in the distance.

The four turned to find two Pokémon making their way toward the group. Two very familiar Pokémon, one with flames dancing and burning bright and the other with large, fluffy wings each of them had personally been embraced with.

Gallows and Rena stopped before the group, the Chandelure looking upon all of them smugly. Rena seemed less confident, almost scared to see her own group again.

"Well isn't this a nice coincidence," Gallows said. "Looks we caught up with you all before you went too far down. And right when you were talking about us too! I hope you weren't divulging in any unpleasant gossip."

"Gallows? Is that you?" Adamant asked.

"Well of course," the Chandelure said smugly. "Who else would I be?"

"I didn't know you evolved, but that's besides the point" Adamant said, borderline speechless. "You actually came down here and brought Rena with you."

"Well I always was the one who had no problem with doing so," Gallows shrugged. "It was the rest of you all that wouldn't go. Took a long time, but it seems we've all realized what needed to be done."

"And Riptide?" Adamant asked. "I don't see her with you..."

"She's... staying behind," Rena answered quietly. "She's going to take care of Hunter while we're gone."

"And you're okay with that?" Adamant asked carefully.

"I am," Rena said softly. "At least, I'm trying to be okay with it. Hunter's important to me, but so are all of you. I'm your team leader and I can't... I'm not allowed to abandon all of you just because of him. That would make me... a terrible leader. Maybe I already am one for trying to keep you all out of this dungeon."

The bird laughed bitterly before water welled up in her eyes. Adamant smiled gently as he approached Rena and nuzzled his head into her neck. Ceylon and Daisy soon joined the Vaporeon, the Bulbasaur pressing his forehead into the Altaria's chest while the hulking Granbull embraced the whole group. She let out a hoarse cry as she cried, the tears streaming down her cheeks. Blot and Gallows remained separated from the group hug, but still looked fondly upon the four.

"I missed all of you so much..." Rena sobbed.

"It's okay, we're altogether now," Ceylon soothed. "Everything'll be okay. We'll all get through this together now."

Yes, the entire time, save for Riptide, had been reunited at last. Now together, the six of them could complete the dungeon as a team, just as they had with every other dungeon. Nothing could stop them from reaching the very bottom of Whispering Abyss now.

With the entirety of Team Skystreaker together, they made their way through the wretched and twisted dungeon feared by all across the continent. It was a long way down, many dozens of floors deep into the ground. The further they went, the stronger the enemies grew. At first the dungeon only sent small Pokémon like Nincada and Rattata after them. Though they usually came in waves of five or more Pokémon at once, they were easy enough to dispatch with a burst of water, a fireball, or a good gust of wind. No one had to take a bite from orans for quite some time.

However, after the team passed the fifteenth floor, a simple fire breath or kick to the stomach wouldn't do it anymore. Then Delcatty and Umbreon went after the team, these ones being far swifter and able to pack more of a punch. These ones required more teamwork, like Ceylon needing to ensnare an enemy with his vines so draconic fire could rain upon their bodies. An oran had to be used every few floors then.

Then past floor thirty, the toughest Pokémon emerged to face the team. Now there were Nidoqueen, Rhydon, Exploud, Scyther, and all sorts of tall, imposing Pokémon with frightening abilities to match. Too often they'd appear from the shadows and strike at the group from behind. Too often they'd get in a good hit on someone in the rear or front, crippling the team and sending them into a temporary panic. It was at this point the seeds and orbs became invaluable, able to slow down the enemies long enough for the team to subdue them. To say it was a living nightmare would be an understatement.

Yet the team prevailed. Failure was never a concern for Team Skystreaker. There were many close calls, such as when a Houndoom nearly burned Ceylon to a crisp or a Tangrowth almost dragged Adamant away into the darkness, but they had always come out on top. With the six of them unified and working as one, nothing ever had a chance of stopping them.

Now after descending dozens and dozens of floors, Team Skystreaker finally found themselves at the very bottom of Whispering Abyss.

Just like the rest of the dungeon, it lacked all semblances of color and life. The black ground remained barren and the large cliffs still trapped them in the dungeon from all sides. Now however, there was a strange new sight to the dungeon. Multiple large, teeth-like protrusions jutted out of the ground in an arched formation. They stretched toward a non-existent sky filled with deep blackness darker than the farthest reaches of space, where only more of these strange, elongated rocks pointed down toward their brethren in that same arched formation. If one looked long enough, they'd say it resembled a giant, gaping mouth ready to snap down upon unsuspecting Pokémon passing by.

But perhaps strangest of all was what lay in the middle of these sharp stones. For whatever reason, there was an entire nursery resting there. There was a soft bed of hay and wool, a pile of blocks with strange symbols etched into the six sides, multiple stuffed dolls resembling Pokémon such as Lapras and Clefairy, pieces of paper strewn about with ink pads and crushed berry paint bottles settled beside them, children's books stacked in a pile and written in a language no one recognized, and something resembling a small pond filled with strange, black liquid that bubbled and gurgled.

In the middle of this playplace was a lone Mareep, carefully arranging the blocks with his mouth in an attempt to spell something out with them. However, he didn't seem too sure as to what he was trying to create. He kept mouthing alien syllables every time he set a block in its place.

"Blitz...?" Blot called out carefully.

The Mareep's ears perked up. He looked over toward the group, eyes widening as he let out a startled bleat.

"Wh-Who are you guys?" he asked with a tremble in his voice.

"We're from the Blackscale Guild," Rena said, taking a step forward as she gave the Mareep a soft gaze. "We're here to take you home."

The Mareep paused. He looked to his side for a moment, ears flicking, before a long frown grew across his face.

"Sorry, but Whispers said I can't go," Blitz said sadly.

"Whispers? I don't know who that is, but you can't stay here," Rena insisted as she ruffled her feathers irritably. "They have no right to keep you here."

The Mareep's ears drooped, but he didn't come any closer to the group. Rena clacked her beak sharply as she made her way toward Blitz. The rest of the team followed after her, realizing there was no point in arguing with the child. They needed to rescue him, even if he seemed rather unwilling. He didn't belong in a Mystery Dungeon under any circumstances.

Blot however, didn't move a muscle. He didn't, because he saw what the rest of his team could not as they neared the Mareep.

He saw the Duskuil hovering beside Blitz. He saw her floating beside him, glowering at the team coming for her precious captive. Her single, rolling eye burned sinisterly, her appearance wavering back and forth between that of a ghost Pokémon and the eldritch monster she truly was.

The ground began to shake. The team abruptly stopped as a ghastly growling sound emitted from all around the group. It was a harrowing sound, the cry of a horrifying, otherworldly beast. It dug into their

ears and drilled unfathomably deep dread into their hearts and minds. Everyone huddled close together, trembling as the horrifying sound filled the room. Even Gallows, the bravest of all, couldn't stop his flames from quivering.

The large, teeth-like protrusions along the ceiling snapped down upon the rocks upon the ground. They encased the Mareep in their hideous jaws, protecting him from the Pokémon that would dare take him away, as the enraged Duskull swooped toward the cowering group.

Multiple tendrils shot out of the ground and ensnared each and every member of Team Skystreaker. They wound around each Pokémon quickly, gagging them and dragging them into the dirt. Adamant and Rena both tried to breathe out attacks upon their binds, but the tendrils made quick work of winding around their mouths, sealing them shut. Even Gallows, for as much as he struggled and burned the tentacles, couldn't break free. Not even Daisy, the strongest of their group, could break the binds. The only one who had been spared was Blot, who could only watch in horror as more and more tendrils emerged from the ground and wrapped themselves around his teammates. It wouldn't be long before they'd overpower the group completely and trap them in thick, black, writhing cocoons.

"You are not taking away my Blitzzy," the Duskull seethed even though she knew the flailing Pokémon couldn't hear her. "I finally have company again after all this time. I finally don't have to be so lonely! You are *not* taking that away from me!"

Her eye flashed, and a black void opened up beneath the bound group. The group let out muffled, panicked shrieks as the tendrils pulled each and every one of them toward the eager, hungry darkness. Blot's heart shattered as he saw his helpless team slowly succumb to the Duskull's wrath, knowing a fate worse than death awaited them.

" *Stop!*" Blot begged. "Please stop! Leave them alone!"

The Duskull turned to him. The illusion dropped just long enough for Blot to see the gaping abyss that was her mouth twisting up into a cruel smile. It reached past her monstrous eye and touched the very top of her head.

"Oh Blotty, I forgot you were with them," she cooed. "You're just so quiet, you know? I really do hope you changed your mind about taking Blitz away from me, otherwise I'm going to have to punish you too..."

"Do not hurt them," Blot pleaded. "Please leave them alone. Let them go."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," she said with an impish giggle. "They want to take Blitz away and I just can't let that happen."

Blot looked back to his teammates to find them rapidly disappearing into the darkness. Any moment they'd be swallowed up completely and forever consumed by the dungeon. He knew he couldn't take on the Duskull; she was much too powerful. She only looked like a Pokémon. In reality, she was a creature undoubtedly far older than time itself with arcane abilities straight from his deepest nightmares.

There was only one thing he could possibly do to save his teammates, the ones who had risked everything to come with him into Whispering Abyss. He couldn't let things end like this for them.

"If you let them go, I will stay," Blot proclaimed. "I will stay here with you and Blitz for as long as I live."

"Oh?" the Duskull asked curiously. "Oh that is a tempting offer... it would be nice to have you back. I'd have two friends now instead of just one... but oh, how do I know you won't break your promise? It really breaks my heart when you lie to me, Blotty..."

"I will not leave," Blot promised. "I only have one Escape Orb and will have my team use it for themselves."

"I suppose..." she said thoughtfully.

She looked over at the struggling, crying Pokémon, humming to herself as she thought carefully. Blot did everything in his power not to shout and beg further. Doing so might only make the situation worse. She might reject his offer altogether and never let his teammates go. All he could do was pray to Arceus above for mercy, even though he doubted the great one had any power over this eldritch being...

"Okay, fine," the Duskull said with a simple shrug. "I'll take your offer."

The tendrils entangling Blot's teammates abruptly released their hold and pushed the group out of the void. Once the Pokémon were freed from the eldritch grasp of the ghastly appendages, they sank back into the ground just as swiftly as they came. Ceylon sobbed hard into Daisy's arms while Adamant and Rena held one another close, both on the verge of crying themselves.

"I'll give you a moment to get your teammates out of here," the Duskull said. "They're not gone by the time I come back, our deal is off."

The Duskull drifted away, disappearing deeper into the chamber. Blot heaved a long sigh of relief, calming his jittering nerves. He nervously approached his cowering team, hoping they didn't notice how much his pupils had dilated.

"Are all of you okay?" Blot asked carefully.

"What was that?" Rena asked, voice trembling as she desperately staved off a panic attack. "Those... those things... what... what were they?"

"Oh gods, oh gods, there was something inside that hole..." Ceylon mumbled deliriously. "Oh gods... it was looking at me with this eye with eyes in it..."

"I don't want to go back..." Adamant whispered under his breath.
"Don't let them take me... don't let me take me..."

Every single one of Blot's teammates was like this, their sanity rapidly slipping away. Blot sighed deeply as he stepped toward the Bulbasaur and opened up the bag around his bulb. Ceylon didn't seem to notice Blot rummaging through its contents before pulling out a single orb with his beak. He took it away from Ceylon as he set it a few feet away from the group. Then he approached Adamant and gingerly removed the bag slung around his neck and brought it over to the orb. The bird turned to face his teammates.

"I am afraid all of you need to return to the outside world," he told them.

It took a moment, but that snapped everyone out of their frantic states. They all shot him horrified stares.

"What are you talking about?" Rena asked frailly.

"The dungeon no longer wants you here," Blot said solemnly. "You five must go home now. And you must do it without me."

"Blot, what are you even talking about?" Daisy demanded. "Why aren't you coming with us?"

"Whispering Abyss is upset that you are trying to take away the Mareep," Blot explained. "It wants to punish you. It is only pacified now because I promised to stay here in exchange for you five leaving the dungeon unharmed."

"Is... are those what those tentacles were?" Daisy asked hesitantly, looking down at her feet with a grimace.

"Yes. And they will come back unless you leave now," Blot said plainly.

"You can't be serious," Gallows said, drawing closer to the Corvisquire. "You mean to tell us that you're going to stay here, forever, and abandon us? Even after everything it took and everything we've all abandoned to be here with you?"

"I am," Blot stated. "Everything will be fine. Do not worry about me."

The entire group was speechless. However, though they said nothing, Blot knew they had no intentions of leaving. He couldn't blame them; to leave him behind in Whispering Abyss was the same as leaving him to die. It was far too cruel to save themselves by sacrificing him.

But they didn't deserve to be swallowed up by Whispering Abyss either. To venture into the dungeon had been his choice and his choice alone. They didn't need to suffer the consequences of his actions, all because they cared so deeply about him.

So Blot made the choice for them.

He picked up the orb resting at his feet and held it firmly in his beak. He raised his head as high as he could.

And then he threw the orb at his teammate's feet.

It shattered on impact. A ring of blue light formed from out of the broken remains of the orb and soon enveloped the team, forming a tight circle around the five Pokémon. His teammates cried out and threw themselves at Blot, but it was too late. Brilliant blue light burst up from the center of the ring, consuming everyone in its wake. All Blot could hear were their screams of protest as the orb's magic whisked them away from Whispering Abyss and to the safety of the outside world.

When the light faded, only the dull, shattered shards of the Escape Orb remained.

Chapter 10

With his teammates gone, Blot joined the Mareep in the middle of the maw-like structure. It had long since returned to its usual state, no longer trapping the little boy between the rocks. The Mareep looked a little frazzled and his wool gave off small sparks, but he seemed composed for the most part. Blot dragged his team's bag over to Blitz as he watched the Mareep go back to playing with the blocks.

"Do you understand what you are even spelling?" Blot asked.

"Not really..." Blitz admitted shyly. "Whispers keeps telling me what the letters on the blocks are, but I keep forgetting them. Like I think this one on this side is... umm... 'milght'."

"Milght," Blot repeated.

The word felt wrong on his tongue. It sounded and felt like a retching sound, like he was coughing up bile. He clacked his beak distastefully as he shook himself.

"Oh you two are learning so fast!" came the Duskull's voice. "You don't sound half-bad with pronouncing milght!"

Blot and Blitz looked over to find the ghost descending upon them, her name supposedly being Whispers. She picked up one of the blocks and turned it in her tatters, pointing to each side and presenting it to the two.

"Since we're going to be friends for a long time, I figured you guys should learn my language," she said cheerfully. "All the letters you need to know are right here on these blocks. They might look a little strange to you guys, but with enough time, you'll know my language as well as footprint runes!"

"Doesn't help us with saying them..." Blitz said with a downcast frown.

"Ah don't worry about it, that's where I come in," she assured. "If you ever want to know how to say it, just ask me and I'll let you know! Like ooh, this one right here, this is 'blerph'."

"Blerph," Blitz coughed out.

"Yeah! Good job!" the Duskull cooed as she pat the Mareep on the head. "You're a natural!"

Blot grumbled to himself as he pushed his head into his bag and rummaged through the contents.

"Hey hey, what's with the bag?" Whispers interjected as she pulled at the strap.

Blot withdrew his head, now holding a Mago berry in his beak. He tossed the berry over to Blitz before placing a foot onto the bag and giving the Duskull a blank stare.

"My teammate packed a number of berries," he said. "I thought I would share some among us. I am sure Blitz here is quite famished."

"Yep... I haven't eaten since Whispers brought me down here," Blitz moaned. "I'm soooo hungry."

He bent down and munched at the Mago, eagerly chewing it up and savoring the sweet taste. Blot reached into the bag again and this time pulled out a Figy berry. He pecked at it, ripping off bits and pieces and nibbled contently. The Duskull shook her head dismissively as she released the bag's strap.

"Alright alright, fine," she conceded. "Keep your bag. It'll save me the trouble of finding you guys food, at least for a little while."

With her permission, Blot and Blitz continued munching on numerous berries. It took Blot a while to get through his Figy berry,

but the Mareep quickly scarfed down his berries and just as quickly needed a new one thrown to him. Even still, despite the rate Blitz went through the fruit, Adamant's bag had enough contents to keep his stomach content.

As the two ate, Whispers took the time to show them each and every block, pointing to each of their sides and pronouncing the letter it supposedly represented. She'd have the two males repeat the letter back to her, praising them or swiftly correcting them if they didn't make enough of a certain gargling noise from the back of their throat.

After a good while, the two had eaten their fill of berries. Blitz's eyes began to droop as he yawned loudly and shook himself. The Duskull picked up on this and softly set down the current block she held. She drew closer to the Mareep and ushered him to the wool bed. He followed her sleepily before settling down in the wool, lazily brushing his head into the softness.

"I think I'll let you take a little nap," Whisper said tenderly. "When you wake up, we can have some more fun. Oh it's so wonderful to have you two here."

She gave him a pat on the head, then swooped away, deeper into the chamber. Blot didn't feel the least bit tired, but did settle himself beside the Mareep. He preened a few of his feathers before looking back at Blitz. He really did seem tired. All of those berries must have made him soporific.

"Are you doing alright?" Blot asked.

"I am," Blitz said with a soft smile, eyes closed contently. "I'm just fine."

Blot looked around them for a moment, seeing if the Duskull was anywhere in sight. Thankfully, the two were alone.

"You know you cannot stay here," the Corvisquire then said, lowering his voice. "You need to go home."

Blitz opened his eyes and stared at the bird, but he didn't get up. He stayed rested on his side as he gave Blot a long stare.

"I'm not going back," Blitz said grumpily. "Whisper is nice, nicer than anyone ever has been to me."

"Is that what she told you to say?" Blot asked. "Or do you believe that yourself?"

"She's nice to me!" Blitz protested with a loud bleat. "I want to stay here because of her! She doesn't call me stupid or make fun of me!"

So Blot had been right; Blitz had come to Whispering Abyss to escape from his problems in real life. The little Mareep was making the same decision Blot had made all those years ago. This time however, Blitz didn't ever intend to leave the dungeon. He wanted to stay there with the eldritch monster.

"Whispers is not your friend," Blot warned cautiously. "She may seem friendly but she will never let you leave here. She is not even a Pokémon."

"Well I don't ever want to leave, so I don't care," Blitz said with a sharp flick of his tail. "There's nothing for me outside. It's not like it matters anyway; everyone I know is dead now. I know a lot of time went by. I might as well just stay here with Whispers where someone actually likes me."

Blot sighed. Yes, it would be an uphill battle convincing the Mareep to leave the dungeon. He knew he could always take the child out by force, but it didn't feel right. Besides, if he did that, the child might shoot the bird down with a bolt and then disappear into the dungeon all over again. Blitz needed gentle coaxing in order to understand why he couldn't stay in Whispering Abyss. Blot only hoped that not too much time would pass for every word they spoke in the deepest

part of the abyss. He didn't want to emerge from the dungeon to find years had passed since he forcibly ejected his teammates out.

"Blitz, I want to tell you a little story about a sad little Rookidee who also felt lonely like you," the bird began.

The Mareep stayed on his side, but kept an attentive ear up, ready for Blot's story. The bird fluffed his feathers as he thought back to his own childhood when he made that awful mistake so many generations ago.

"There once was a lonely Rookidee not much older than you," Blot began wistfully. "He was a very lonely and sad child. He was always surrounded by Pokémon yet he still felt very much alone. He could not feel their warmth or their words, even if his feathers brushed up against them. He knew his parents loved him too. He could never forget their kindness. Yet he still did not feel he belonged. He felt he had no place to the world. The world was moving and he was always being left behind.

"One day, the Rookidee decided he no longer wanted to feel so alone. He had grown very tired of waking up feeling as hollow as his bones. He decided he no longer needed the world. He would find a new world and be happy there. Surely all of his problems would cease if he left this old world and found the new one. He would find friends that thought like him. He would find purpose. He would miss his parents of course... but they would understand. He was expected to leave the nest soon regardless."

Blitz frowned softly as he undoubtedly pondered the poor bird's misery. He undoubtedly empathized with the Rookidee as well.

"So the Rookidee discovered that there was a Mystery Dungeon with great time dilation," Blot went on. "All dungeons had time dilation but this one had the most of all in the region. It was so great that Pokémon only knew of its power because every couple of hundred years, someone emerged from it and revealed how long they had been gone. Sometimes they were lone Pokémon that had wandered

in there without knowing the dungeon's true power. Sometimes they were expedition teams who chose the wrong dungeon to explore.

"The Rookidee knew this dungeon would be his hope. So the little bird went to the feared Mystery Dungeon and willingly entered, knowing what fate awaited him. For reasons unknown, he was able to traverse through the dungeon with hardly any effort. The dungeon apparitions always let him be as he dove deeper and deeper into the dungeon. Only his hunger proved problematic. It was not long before the little bird reached the very bottom of the dungeon where so few others had reached. Once there, he left the dungeon with the aid of an orb and emerged in a world eight hundred years into the future. He eagerly awaited his new life and all of the friends he could make.

"But he learned what a mistake this was."

"But... why was it a mistake?" Blitz asked. "I thought he wanted a new world?"

"He did," Blot said with a nod. "But it did not make him happy. This new world only made him more empty. Coming to this new world did not give him anything he wanted. He still felt he did not belong. Everything felt alien. Nothing was familiar. There were even some species of Pokémon he did not recognize. He had gained nothing and instead lost everything he had. He lost his family. He lost his home. He lost his sense of being. While this world had so much opportunity... it was not his world."

The bird looked at the Mareep. The boy seemed skittish and couldn't think of anything to say, instead mulling over the story. Blot stood up and stepped toward the Mareep.

"But his story did not end unhappily," Blot then said. "The bird found friends in this new world. He found a team of good Pokémon that cared about one another. He found friends that stayed together like a flock and supported one another no matter the circumstances. Though the bird will always carry a broken heart because of his

actions... his friends would dull the pain. Their companionship would remind him of what he always sought.

"I would like to be one of those friends to you, Blitz. I want to ease away your loneliness and give you the better world you crave. You do not need to stay here in this dark dungeon to escape your loneliness. Come with me to the outside world. I am sure you miss the sun on your fur."

Tears formed in the corners of Blitz's eyes, but he refused to shed them. He wiped at them with a paw and sniffled softly.

"Are... are you sure?" Blitz whimpered. "The world... it's going to be scary when we leave... nothing will be the same. And how do I know you won't leave me?"

"Because I know how much the loneliness hurts," Blot answered. "I know how alone you feel in a strange new world full of unfamiliar Pokémon. Until the loneliness is eased, I will be there for you. I will always be your flockmate. I always promised I would even before I knew you."

"Okay..." the Mareep said with a tearful smile. "Okay... I'll come with you then."

Blot beamed at the little boy. He was just about to thank the little one when he noticed a certain Duskkull hovering behind the Mareep. He knew she hadn't been there for very long, but the eerie, seething light emitting from her rolling eye told him everything. She had heard enough of their conversation to know exactly what they now planned to do.

"Blotty..." she said in a haunting, cold voice. "What did I tell you Blotty, about taking away my little Blitzzy?"

"He cannot stay here," Blot said firmly, hoping she didn't notice the quiver in his voice. "He does not belong to you. He deserves to return home."

"Home? Hah! This is his home!" Whispers laughed cruelly. "What, you really think there's anywhere for him in the outside world? Or for you for that matter? You should know better than anyone that you two both belong to me now... you both sealed your fate the moment you saw my heart."

A flash of black came into the corner of Blot's vision. He dove out of the way as a tendril shot out of the ground where he once stood. He fluttered toward the team bag and quickly turned it over, spilling its contents all over the floor. A dozen berries and seeds tumbled onto the ground, along with a number of orbs. However, there was one particular orb that Blot was most interested in. One that Whispers immediately noticed herself.

"You! You got rid of your Escape Orb!" she shrieked. "I saw it! I saw you use it on your team!"

"No one said that was the only one we packed," Blot shot back. "You can thank my friends for that."

He sprang at the Escape Orb, launching himself at full speed for his salvation. However, just before he could snatch it, a tendril wrapped itself around Blot's foot and dragged him to the ground. He squawked and screeched as the black portal opened up beneath him, threatening to devour him. A dreadful black aura oozed out of Whispers's form as she loomed close, her Duskull form completely abandoned. Now Blot could only see her in her true, horrifying form, her multiple pupils wriggling with delight. The abyss that was her mouth stretched open into oblivion, eating his very soul.

" *Oh no, Blotty,*" she told him teasingly, her voice now warbled and demonic. "*Oh no, I'm afraid you're staying here with me. I let you go once, I will never let you go again ... you're mine. MINE BLOTTY. MINE MINE MINE. MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE*"

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Something shattered beside Blot. He looked over to find that Blitz had smashed an orb right by the bird's wing. It was not just any of the orbs; it had been the Escape Orb.

The familiar blue light enveloped Blot and Blitz, freeing the bird from the eldritch clutches. Whispers shrieked a ghastly, ear-piercing wail as hundreds of thousands of tentacles shot from everywhere. They sprang from the ground, the ceiling, the walls...

They reached for the two, grabbing at them and drowning their sight with writhing blackness...

The Escape Orb activated before the nightmare could envelope them and teleported the two out of the dungeon in a flash of light. The last thing either of them heard was the furious screams of the dungeon itself...

When the radiant light faded, Blot found himself at the entrance of Whispering Abyss. The afternoon sunlight touched his feathers gently, welcoming him back to the real world. Though his venture into the dungeon had not been terribly long, he still missed the sun's warmth. He forgot how good it felt against him, how much it soothed him with its radiance. The bird gathered himself together and got to his feet with haste. Blitz stood close by, smiling softly as he took in the fresh air and comforting light of day.

"We are quite fortunate that you chose the right orb," Blot told him.

"I got lucky," Blitz shrugged. "Or Arceus helped us. Maybe he felt bad."

"Perhaps he did," Blot considered. "Perhaps he finally answered one of my prayers."

The Corvisquire looked out into the distance where civilization waited behind the thick trees. He knew at least eight hundred years had passed since he entered the dungeon, at least, that would be the case for his teammates. While Blot had only spent a short while longer in the dungeon than them, the time dilation was the greatest at the bottom of the abyss. Even a few minutes down there could result in years passing on the outside. For all he knew, it had been a decade since his teammates returned to the real world. That, or they made the foolish mistake of entering the dungeon again to save Blot...

No, he couldn't think that. His teammates were probably waiting for him, somewhere. Maybe they were at the guild, if the guild was still standing that was...

What had changed this time? How would this time era look now? Would the buildings now be made of steel instead of wood and brick? Would Pokémon have finally learned to harness electricity like the humans supposedly did? Would the postal service be replaced with something else, perhaps teleportation of letters using psychic Pokémon?

These questions filled Blot's mind, but he knew standing around would bring him no answers.

"Come along," Blot told the Mareep. "It is time to see this new world."

"Yeah..." Blitz said quietly, his ears drooping ever so slightly. "I hope it isn't too scary..."

"It may overwhelm you at first but you will adjust," Blot assured. "It will certainly help that you have someone who understands how you feel."

"Yeah, you're right," he said, smiling a little at the thought.

The two looked back at Whispering Abyss, the harrowing dungeon that would forever be in their deepest nightmares. It stared eerily

back at them, its gaping entrance glaring deeply. And though it was only a tiny little whisper, Blot could hear the dungeon. He could hear it seething, snarling and hissing an unnatural, monstrous sound that no being of this world could ever make.

" *Mine... mine... mine... mine... all mine...* "

With a shudder, the two quickly turned away from the dungeon and headed for the Blackstone Guild.

That was the last time the two ever saw Whispering Abyss.

By nightfall, Blot and Blitz arrived at Cinder Town, home to the guild. Blot was relieved to find that the town hadn't been obliterated and hadn't changed its name, but that was the only comfort he was allowed. As he suspected, the entire town had changed with the times. For starters, the town had grown twice its size with a large number of its space occupied with shops, each selling their own variety of goods and fiercely competing with the others for dominance over the market. Not only that, but they were so closely spaced together that Blot himself could barely fit between the buildings. Before, his entire team could fit between each shop.

Gone away were the candles that lit the town at night. Now lanterns lined the streets, hanging above from long lines of wire. They came in all varieties of soft colors and seemed to be made of a thin paper that allowed the light to cast a soft glow over the town.

The buildings themselves no longer resembled Pokémon heads or big, colorful tents. Now they were all box-like structures with glass windows and doors that slid open. The streets had been paved with smooth, grey stones, much unlike the dirt roads Blot had become accustomed to.

"Wow... the world sure looks different," Blitz remarked as the two wandered down the road, passing a surprising number of lively Pokémon as they did so.

"It is different," Blot admitted. "It is also remarkably similar to the world I grew up in from over a thousand years ago."

"Really?" the Mareep asked, shooting him a bewildered gaze.

"Yes..." Blot said as he took in his surroundings. "Back then we modeled our towns after human towns as best as we could. It worked for the humans so we thought it would work for them. It was only a few hundred years later did we decide to change our architecture into something more our own. It seems that the world has gone back to the old ways."

"I wonder why," Blitz pondered.

"Maybe a war tore civilization apart and we had to start anew," Blot considered. "Maybe Pokémon rebuilt their cities like before because they missed the designs. Maybe they yearned for humanity again."

Yet despite how similar the world was to his days of old, there were subtle changes. For one, he saw many holes cut out of the buildings, particularly near the roofs. At first he didn't understand why, but when he saw a Honchkrow swoop down and enter the building through the hole, followed by a number of Murkrow, he understood. These were passageways for the birds of the world. No longer did they have to rely on other Pokémon to enter buildings; now they could do so of their own free will through these special entrances. Just like Blot had always wanted.

The writings upon the store's signs were now in a new language. No longer were they in footprint runes or those strange symbols humans used. Now they were something new altogether, something resembling dots arranged in arbitrary ways.

Lastly, even though it was quite dark, the town still bustled with activity. Before, Pokémon would usually retire and only the dark and ghost-types prowled about. The same could not be said now. Now Pokémon of all types roamed about, whether it was a Marowak getting a late night meal or a group of children watching a small play

performed entirely by puppets controlled by a Meowstic's telekinesis. For whatever reason, more Pokémon seemed far more willing to enjoy the night life even if it went against their biological clocks.

Though these changes were quite striking, Blot knew that Blitz probably found this more bewildering than the Corvisquire. It would take him a good deal of time to adjust. However, based on the awed expression the Mareep wore as he gazed about the town, Blot knew he'd be fine. He'd adapt and perhaps even thrive in this new world.

The two traversed down the winding, curved roads, passing through much of the town and admiring the sights along the way. Before long, they arrived at the spot where the Blackscale Guild once stood.

Quite surprisingly, it was still there. And also despite everything, it had not changed a bit. It still stood as a marvelous onyx castle, well-maintained despite the centuries passing. Blot couldn't see a single crack in its rocky exterior. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought the guild had been constructed quite recently.

"Is this where your friends are?" Blitz asked.

"Hopefully," Blot replied.

"Are they... going to like me?" Blitz asked shyly. "Will they want me to be their friend too?"

"You will be just fine," Blot assured. "I have no doubt they will like you. Even if they shoo you away, I will take care of you until you are older. I will make sure of it. Time leapers must support one another."

Blitz smiled brightly and wiggled his ears. The two then entered the guild to find that the interior had also remained unchanged even after all this time. Blot would have thought they'd at least expand the guild to accommodate more Pokémon, but everywhere he turned, familiar sights greeted him. Not a thing had changed besides the unfamiliar Pokémon that walked past him. Just like outside, a surprising number of teams were awake and discussing night missions.

He wondered if the guild hadn't changed because it was a town landmark. Maybe it had survived whatever had altered the world while Blot was gone and stood as a monument, a symbol from days of long ago.

"Ah, it's been so long. I wondered if you would ever come back."

Blot and Blitz stopped. The two turned to find a Ninetales approaching them, and an elderly one at that. His golden fur no longer held a glorious sheen and was instead dull and frayed. His once bright crimson eyes so full of wisdom were now hazy and black. He barely even had the strength to keep his beautiful nine tails off the ground.

The Ninetales stopped before the two and gave them a wide smile, showing off a number of missing fangs.

"I am sorry, I do not recognize you," Blot said.

"Ah, I understand. The centuries are finally beginning to take their toll on me," the Ninetales laughed hollowly. "It's me, Pyre. I was Guildmaster Axis's apprentice in the era you knew me."

"Pyre?" Blot gasped. "You are still alive..."

"You were only gone for eight hundred years, and I was still less than a century old when you entered Whispering Abyss," Pyre smiled. "I knew I would see you again before my time came, so long as I remained in this guild after Axis's passing and took his place. And ah... this must be the Mareep you went to rescue."

"That's me," Blitz said with a flicker of his ears.

"Well, I'm sure that your team would love to see the both of you again," Pyre said warmly. "They've been waiting for about seven years now. Here, let me take you to them."

Blot's heart sank. Seven years had passed since they last saw him. Although Pyre's words confirmed that they were in the guild, he didn't know if he was ready to face them. He had forcibly pushed them out of the dungeon. His reasons might have been for their safety, but he didn't know if they saw it the same way.

Nonetheless, Blot and Blitz followed the Ninetales to the bedrooms. As Blot had suspected, his team was no longer in the same room they had occupied all those years ago. They had been moved into a deeper part of the dungeon where the bigger living quarters were to support teams of ten, twenty, or even thirty Pokémon. These rooms cost three times as much to rent as much than their old room, but if a team truly was massive and productive, then paying that fee would hardly be a problem.

The Ninetales brought the two to Team Skystreaker's new bedroom, the very last room at the end of this particular hall. Blot braced himself as Pyre rapped his paw against the wooden door.

"This is Guildmaster Pyre," he announced. "I must apologize for intruding upon you this late, but I have a couple of Pokémon that direly wish to see you."

"Sure! Let them in!" Rena's voice called from behind the door. "We're all still awake."

Pyre cast Blot and Blitz a reassuring smile, then nudged the door open with his head. Blot nervously stepped inside with Blitz beside him. Pyre didn't follow them in, instead gently shutting the door behind them as he left them in peace.

The bedroom reminded Blot awful lot of their old room, but more expanded upon. There was a large pool in the back, only this one was twice as big than the other one. Then there was the makeshift tree near the entrance, also much taller and having thicker branches capable of holding even Corviknight. But perhaps most surprising of all was the number of beds Blot spotted in the room. He had anticipated six of them, maybe eight if his team was waiting for Blot

and Blitz's return, but now there were *twelve* beds. Upon seeing his team, it didn't take long to understand why that was.

Since he had last seen his team, they had gained a few more members. Namely, a Sylveon, Mismagius, Anorith, and Zangoose. The four new teammates gave Blot and Blitz a perplexed stare, unable to understand the significance of their presence.

But thankfully, their odd gazes were quickly interrupted by the joyous cries of the original Team Skystreaker members. Before Blot knew it, he and Blitz were wrapped up in a tight hug from Rena as Daisy, Adamant, and Ceylon swiftly joined in. Gallows kept his distance and instead remained close to a Warturtle, probably the one named Riptide.

"Oh, you finally came back!" Rena cheered. "I was so worried about you two! I didn't know if you two were really going to come back!"

"I said everything would be fine," Blot coughed out from the Altaria's deadly hug.

"I know... I know," Rena said. "But there was always a chance you were just lying to me..."

"We honestly thought about going back to get you," Ceylon admitted, the little Bulbasaur now an Ivysaur who didn't have such a bashful look to his eyes anymore. "It didn't feel right to abandon you... again. But then Adamant saw that you took his bag and remembered he had an Escape Orb in it. And then we all figured out what you probably planned on doing."

"So we went home," Daisy then said. "Was pretty shocking seeing how different everything was, not going to lie. I'm still not over how weird everything is. It's really not fun being illiterate too, let me tell you..."

The group held the bird and Mareep a little while longer, then released them from their group hug. Blitz and Blot took that moment

to catch their breath. They saw the four new Skystreaker members still shooting them bewildered stares and whispering to one another, no doubt grasping for explanations. Riptide seemed to pick up on this and approached her teammates, her fluffy tail swiveling softly.

"This is Blot and Blitz," she told her teammates. "These are the two Pokémon we were always waiting for."

"You mean... the Corvisquire that was on your team hundreds of years ago?" the Zangoose asked.

"That's right," Riptide smiled. "He's finally come back, and brought our newest teammate with him."

The four's jaws dropped, or in the Anorith's case, flared her feather-like scales. They hastily approached the Corvisquire and Mareep, immediately showering the both of them with friendly, awkward smiles.

"So you're Blot!" the Sylveon gasped, his ribbons fluttering dramatically as he spoke. "Oh it's so good to finally meet you! Everyone is always talking about a daring adventure you went on. Whispering Abyss! Wow, I can't even imagine going down there. I think I'd faint just seeing the place!"

"And what a cute little Mareep you rescued," the Zangoose cooed as she held the boy's face between her claws. "Ooh, it's a good thing you were taken away from that awful place. Someone like you doesn't deserve to spend their whole life in a Mystery Dungeon, especially not that one! Blitz is your name, right?"

"Yeah..." Blitz said bashfully.

"Aww, well welcome back to the real world, Blitz," the Zangoose said as she rubbed his cheeks. "The name's Stripes. Talk to me anytime you want. I've always got an ear open."

"Yeah, and my name's Lilac," the Sylveon said with a flourish of a ribbon. "Welcome back to the guild. You both sound really cool. I want to hear everything about what went down in that dungeon. Especially with those tentacles at the bottom! What was that all about? I didn't know dungeons could do that..."

"And I'm Caris!" the Anorith chimed in. "I used to be the newbie, but looks like Blitz is going to take my place! Oh boy, I've always wanted to be someone's teacher!"

"Tenebrae," the Mismagius greeted. "You can just call me 'Brae' though; I get it's a mouthful."

Blot looked upon his new teammates. Though he had barely known them for more than a few minutes, he already saw the potential bonds he could form with each of them. He also saw how easily they'd grow attached to Blitz, making it so that he never felt unwanted on Team Skystreaker. He could already tell how welcome the little Mareep was with the way his eyes shined and how much he smiled at being the center of attention.

Then Blot looked back at the teammates he had known for years, the teammates that had followed him deep into Whispering Abyss even though it would steal everything away from them. He looked upon them and saw the happiness in their eyes. He saw how much their hearts soared just seeing him again after so many years.

And for the very first time since his hatching all those centuries upon centuries ago, he finally felt he belonged somewhere.

"Well, now that you're finally back," Lilac then said, sauntering closer to the Corvisquire with a snide grin. "You're gonna tell me all about your adventure right? Rena and Riptide have told me all kinds of stories... but somethings tells me you've got a very interesting story to tell as well..."

Blot chuckled as he ruffled his feathers and flew up to the makeshift tree. He settled himself in a branch and watched as everyone

gathered beneath the tree.

"You are right," Blot admitted. "I do have an interesting story to tell."

"Well spill it then!" Lilac urged. "Tell us your story!"

"Yeah! Tell us how you got out of Whispering Abyss!" Caris cheered.
"We all wanna know!"

"Very well," Blot said smoothly. "But only if in return Rena shares what happens after I forced our team to leave the dungeon. And what happened during the eight hundred years I was not a part of."

"Of course," Rena said cheerfully. "That's no problem at all. What about you Riptide? You've got a lot of history to catch Blot up on... think you can handle it?"

"I already did it once with you guys when you came back," Riptide said with a coy little smile. "No reason why I can't do it twice."

"Then we have a deal," Blot said.

Everyone settled down beneath the tree. The bird looked upon each of his teammates. Adamant, Rena, and Ceylon sat close together, the Vaporeon and Ivysaur resting comfortably against Rena's soft wings. Riptide leaned comfortably into Gallows, smiling and giggling as she whispered things to him. And all of the new members surrounded Blitz, Stripes unable to resist the urge to stroke his wooly fleece while the others laughed.

And so upon seeing the camaraderie between his teammates, the flockmates he had searched for all this life, the Corvisquire began his story.

"A long time ago, about one thousand and six hundred years ago, there lived a Rookidee in a place called Ashen Village..."

-THE END-